CALIFORNIA

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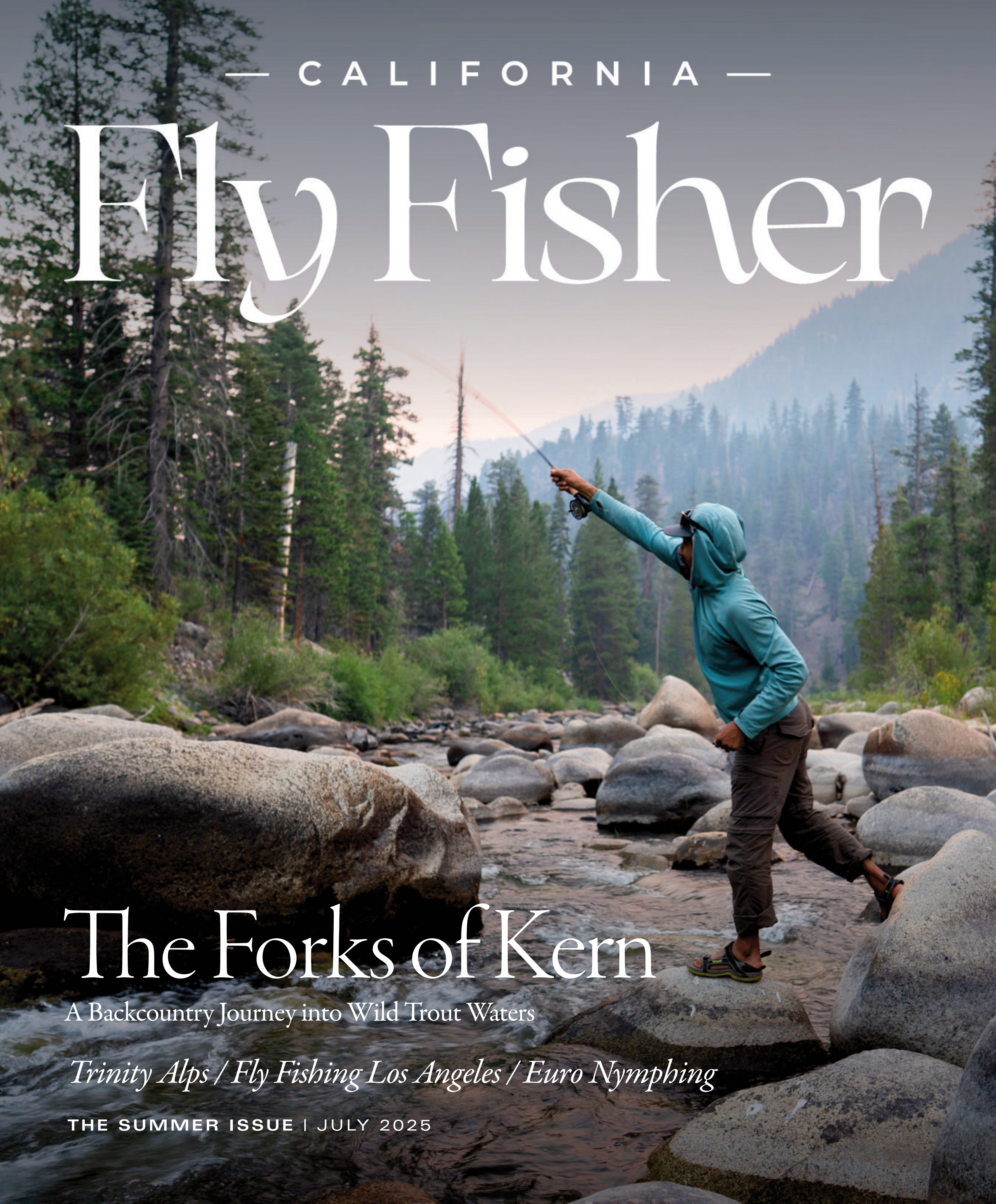
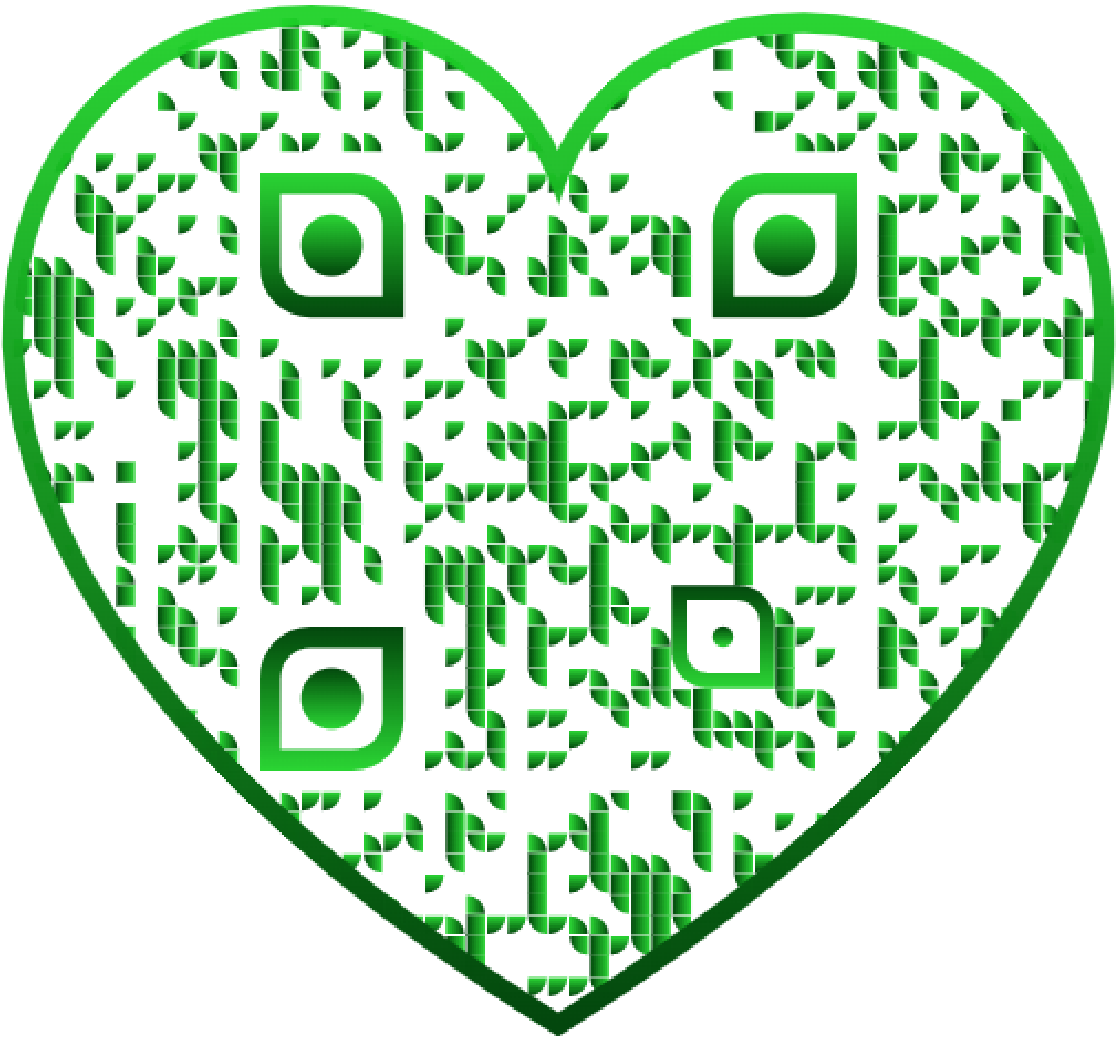


The Forks of Kern

A Backcountry Journey into Wild Trout Waters

Trinity Alps / Fly Fishing Los Angeles / Euro Nymphing

THE SUMMER ISSUE | JULY 2025



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[Top] Tracey on the blue ribbon waters of the McCloud River. [Bottom] Editor-at-Large George Revel and Tracey at George and Julie's wedding. Photo by Carrie Barlow

A LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to the Summer 2025 issue of *California Fly Fisher*.

When we relaunched *California Fly Fisher* last year, we did so with the belief that California's fly-fishing community deserved a publication that truly reflected its diversity, passion, and depth of knowledge. Now, as we move into our second year, that belief feels even more urgent—and more rewarding.

What continues to inspire us is the way our community shows up: at the water's edge, in local fly shops, online, and increasingly, in person. This spring, we hosted several International Fly Fishing Film Festival (IF4) events across Northern California—gatherings that reminded us how connected we are by a shared love of rivers, fish, and wild places. We're bringing those events to Southern California this fall and hope to see even more of you there.

We're also growing through partnerships—with organizations like California Trout, who have long fought to protect our fisheries; with content creators like Fish the West Films, who help tell the stories that matter; and with brands who recognize the value of California's unique fly fishing culture. These collaborations help us amplify the voices of anglers across the state.

In this Summer issue, we explore community through pieces like *Casting Clubs of Northern California*, a look at the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club and others keeping the craft and camaraderie alive. We also head south for *Urban Fishing – LA*, where the fly fishing scene is as unexpected as it is vibrant.

The casting club story hits close to home. When I stepped into this role, my biggest worry wasn't about running a magazine—it was whether I had the fly-fishing chops to do it justice. I didn't come with a fly-fishing industry background or decades of experience with a rod in hand. But that's where Editor-at-Large George Revel and our outstanding team of editorial advisors come in. I may be conducting the symphony, but they're the ones playing all the instruments.

Still, it's been a steep and exciting learning curve. I've soaked up knowledge from every page we publish. I've enrolled in GGACC's Learn to Fly Fish program—and recently earned my Bronze Level Casting Skills. Growing as an angler is, without a doubt, the best perk of the job.

What's most exciting is that this magazine is becoming more than a publication—it's becoming a hub for connection. And that's because of you.

If you enjoy what we're doing, let us know. Email us at info@CalFlyFisher.com. Share your thoughts, tell a friend, and help us keep the momentum going. We have big plans ahead—and we're just getting started.

See you on the water,

Tracey

Tracey Diaz

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“The tundra walk there reminded us fall was coming. Golds, crimson and copper hues filled the valley. Bears had left steps for eons, so the prints were deep and wide apart. Not a path but a marked way.” —Kate Crump Photo: JEREMY KORESKI © 2025 Patagonia, Inc.

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Casting on the Kern at sunset. Photo by George Revel

Fall River, California | Val Atkinson

Sometimes to save a river, you have to buy it.

In Northern California, Western Rivers Conservancy has set out to protect three miles of the Fall River, one of the largest spring-fed rivers in the country. Renowned for its clean, cold water, superb trout fishing and rich bird life, the Fall is one of the Golden State's most important rivers. Our efforts will lay the groundwork for restoring 135 acres of wetlands and wet meadows and ensure that this vital stretch of the Fall remains forever intact.

We count on support from people like you, anglers who know the value of clean water, healthy rivers and public access. Help us do more on rivers including the Fall, Teton, Rio Grande and others by visiting westernrivers.org.

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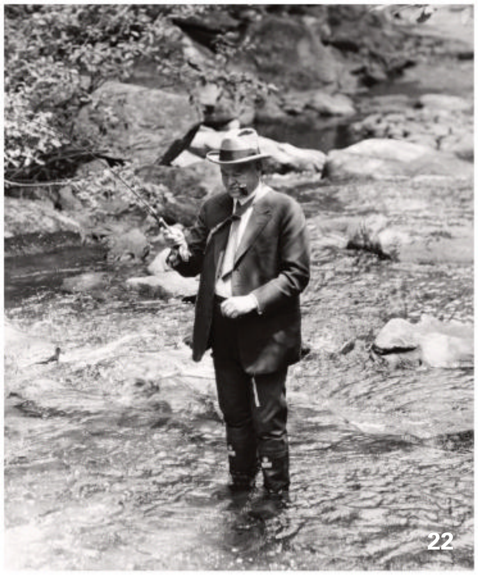

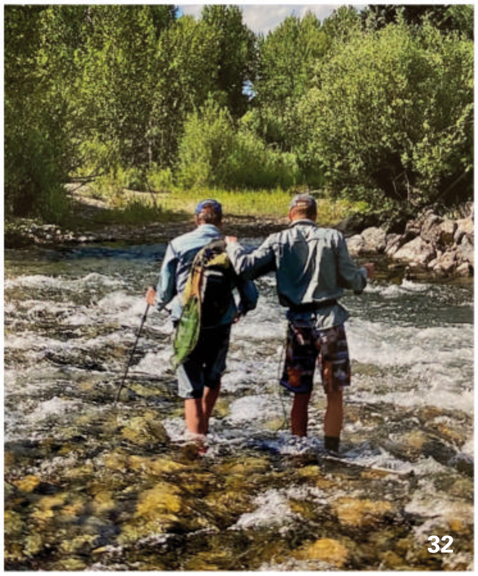

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Fly Fisher

Editor-at-Large George Revel

Creative Director David Dines

Copy Editors Samantha Dewberry, Sam Silverstein, Karen Valentine

Contributing Writers Bill Barich, Hogan Brown, Matt Callies, John Fellner, Sean Jansen, Lino Jubilado, EJ Melzer, Lance Gray, Dagur Guðmundsson, Robert Ketley, Jeff Ludlow, Al Quattrocchi, Bob Simerau, Sean Stiny, Chris Wright, Bernard Yin

Publisher Tracey Diaz

Accountant Penny Millar

Accounts Receivable Nichole Sugg

Contributing Photographers and Artists Val Atkinson, Ben Engle, Obi Kaufmann, Scott Nelson

Editorial Committee Nick Blixt, Hogan Brown, Dagur Guðmundsson, Matt Heron, Jeff Ludlow, Julia Mitchell, Rebecca Ramirez, John Sherman, Mike Wier, Bernard Yin

Founder Richard Anderson

Friends of *California Fly Fisher*
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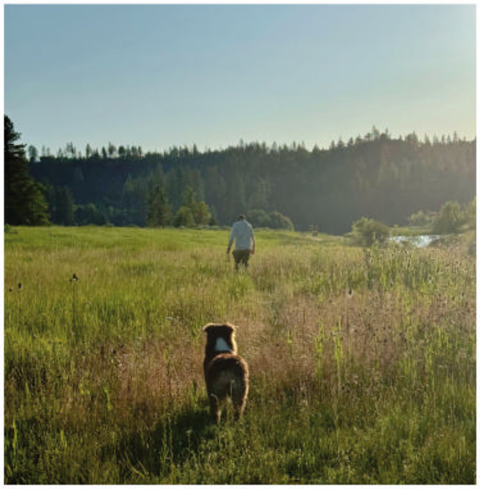

[Top] George and Remy stirring up grasshoppers.
[Bottom] The blue ribbon waters of Hat Creek.
Photos by Julie Rutiz

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I stood between two great mountains, Mt. Lassen to the east at my back and Shasta to my west, staring into a deep blue-green hole where crystal-clear, cold water poured from a hole in the ground. While incredibly special, these springs are quite common between the two volcanoes. They provide the lifeblood of California and have made it one of the best places in the world for thousands of years. We jumped into the cold water for a midday swim, with the sun high and temperatures reaching the high 80s. There wasn't much point in fishing. It was a strange feeling swimming above a hole in the earth of unknown depths, at least to me.

As we hiked to the stream, grasshoppers jumped and flew from our footsteps. These strange insects are signs of the great fishing that was to come. When we approached the grassy banks of one of California's most famous streams, Hat Creek, the PMDs elegantly rose from the water's surface, backlit by the low sun. My eyes shifted to the water's surface, watching the ripples created by fish feeding on the emerging insects and the swirls of water created from the powerful swipe of tails that sent them back to their lies.

I was in the mood for dry fly fishing, but these fish were unwilling to break the surface for the dainty PMDs drying their wings on the water. I decided not to change my fly from the size 10 chubby I had fished with on the McCloud the day before. I made a short cast upstream from where I stood to a little bucket where I had caught hundreds of trout over the years. A trout immediately slashed at the fly, nearly leaping entirely out of the water. Surprised by the immediacy, I watched and didn't set the hook. Smiling ear to ear, I observed the trout slash at the fly until a big head emerged. Unable to resist, I set the hook and landed a beautiful rainbow.

On my walk back to the truck, swarmed by mosquitoes, I reflected on how special *California Fly Fisher* is. This moment culminated decades of passionately exploring and fishing in California. The pages of this magazine are filled with words from those who have similarly dedicated their lives to sharing their extensive experiences fishing our waters. What an honor and pleasure it is to introduce the summer 2025 edition.

For me, it is back to the salty air and cool breezes of the Pacific Ocean in search of sea-going monsters. That is, until the fall rains call me up north to the redwoods. Until then.

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George Revel

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CONTRIBUTORS

In This Issue

Jim Burke

Jim taught high school English in the Bay Area for 35 years and wrote over 30 books about teaching and learning, none of which helped him learn to fly fish. He is pretty sure, however, that teenagers are as difficult to understand as trout can be to catch. This is his first article about fly fishing.

Lance Gray

Lance and his wife Kirsten own Lance Gray & Company, a full-service outfitter offering guided trips, fly-fishing tours, and workshops. Lance is a signature tyer for Aqua Flies and a pro staff member for Sage, RIO, Simms, Fishpond, and Umpqua Feather Merchants. LanceGrayandCompany.com

Dagur Årni Gu∂mundsson

Dagur splits his time guiding for salmon and trout in Iceland and carp, bass, and surf perch on California's Central Coast. A contributor to *California Fly Fisher* since 2020, he's also director of fly education for the American Carp Society and a full-time fly tyer and guide.

Tim Huckaby

Tim is a longtime software industry leader and keynote speaker with 25+ years working for or with Microsoft. When not on stage, he guides fly fishers in California's Golden Trout Wilderness, San Diego, and Baja. Known for storytelling, teaching, and conservation, Tim brings passion and expertise to every outdoor adventure. TimHuckaby.com

Sean Jansen

Sean is a freelance writer and photographer as well as a seasonal wilderness guide in Yellowstone National Park. When not guiding clients, he can be found exploring mountainous and coastal regions around the country looking for remote and wild salmonids with a passion for conservation.

Lino Jubilado

A passionate Southern California fly angler, educator, and tournament champion, Lino is an accomplished fly tyer who has earned multiple CFFO gold medals and Carp Fest honors. Featured in *Vice, America Outdoors,* and *River of Angels,* he mentors with The Mayfly Project and serves as ambassador for Simms, TFO, Flymen, and more.

EJ Melzer

EJ is past-president and current board member of Peninsula Fly Fishers. He's a business owner, not a guide, but loves doing presentations, workshops, and fly-tying clinics for clubs. He has proudly encouraged many new members to become enthusiastic fly fishermen. Looking forward to fishing Yellowstone for the first time this year.

Al Quattrocchi

Al is a lifelong saltwater fly angler, educator, and environmental advocate. He holds two IGFA world records, co-founded many SoCal fly events, and teaches casting worldwide. Al is *Tail Magazine's* West Coast editor, West Coast Ambassador to the American Museum of Fly Fishing, and author of *The Corbina Diaries*. He lives in Los Angeles.

Bob Semerau

Bob is a veteran outdoor journalist who has spotlighted California's fishing scene for over 20 years. His reporting has elevated nonprofits like Mission F.I.S.H. and Fish for Life, while also helping preserve historic vessels like the Betty O. Bob is past President and Executive Director of OWAC.

Chris Wright

Chris is a freelance writer and trout bum who lives in Los Angeles. He writes about fishing and climate change, publishes his own magazine, *Cafe Goblin*, and fishes the Kern, Tule, and Owens rivers whenever possible. He is writing his first novel, *Headwaters*, about fly fishing during the apocalypse.

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COLLISION COURSE

I just received my spring issue of *California Fly Fisher* magazine. Kudos again to you and Tracey for the polish and updates to the look and feel, as well as the quality of this publication.

A recent issue of the magazine shone the spotlight on Pyramid Lake and essentially "glorified" the story of this fishery and the recovery of the Lahontan cutthroat trout (LCT) that inhabit the lake. The pieces within this issue were well-written and effectively accentuated the uniqueness of that place.

This spring issue now spotlights the Truckee River and highlights the fantastic rainbow and brown trout fishery that is there. Matt is indeed as good of person as anyone to try and break down some of the intimidation that the Truckee can present for anglers. Another great piece.

As a fourth-generation (by birth) Renoite, I need no explanation on the merits of the very cool home waters that sandwich my home. I learned to fish on the Truckee during a decade-long drought in which parts of the river dried up completely, and I spent my winters dragging wooly worms through the sand at Pyramid, back when the fishing was generally terrible.

Will the next issue of *California Fly Fisher* discuss the head-on collision course that these two amazing fisheries are on? Both have been highlighted … but while ignoring the giant elephant in the room for anglers in both recent issues. Perhaps the plan is in place for the two spotlights within these recent issues to set the stage for a follow-up piece on the brewing conflict in a future issue.

What is the future for both fisheries?

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service has publicly stated that "full" recovery for LCTs is not possible with non-native rainbows and brown trout in the Truckee River "system." The ability of rainbow trout to crossbreed with LCTs threatens the "pure" genetics of LCTs over time. Brown trout like … well, maybe prefer … to eat LCTs. Both rainbows and browns compete with LCTs for prime habitat and holding water within the "system."

So, which fishery has more *value*?

Do anglers value restoration over angling opportunity?

Most local and visiting anglers I meet are unaware of the cataclysmic collision coming ahead in answering these questions. The elephant in my backyard and on my homewaters is only getting bigger each day.

I look forward to the next issue of *California Fly Fisher* magazine.

Darin M. Elmore

Editor's note:

Thank you for your letter—and for your long-standing connection to the waters of Pyramid Lake and the Truckee River. As someone rooted in that landscape, your perspective adds a powerful and personal lens to the ongoing conversation about these two iconic fisheries.

You're right to point out the complex and pressing questions about native species recovery, the role of non-native trout, and what the future may hold for anglers and the fish alike. These are precisely the kinds of conversations we hope the magazine can help surface—nuanced, passionate, and informed by experience.

Your letter underscores the need for ongoing dialogue, which we hope to explore in future issues. Thank you for bringing attention to this critical topic.

The Editors

HIRE A GUIDE, BE A GOOD GUEST

We received a strong response to our May blog post, 'Hire a Guide. Be a Good Guest,' by Curtis Fong. A selection of those letters appears here and is also available at CalFlyFisher.com.

Great article! AMEN.

I would amplify everything you wrote,

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plus—ask a ton of questions—you are paying for this service, be sure to leave the day a better angler than you started—be open with your guide…on your abilities (strengths and areas to improve) … and start the day with something specific you want to work on (not just "catch a lot of fish")—bring a good joke or story. You are going to spend hours with this person and everyone wants to enjoy their work day. Help make it a great one for everyone on the boat (or wading group …)

Thanks for this article!

Bruce Greenwood
Palo Alto

A rant and some questions regarding tipping.

Guides should not have to depend on the generosity of their clients to be paid fairly for the work and services they perform. The article makes mention of leaving a "fat" tip, but what does that mean?

I was recently at lunch (for two) where the bill had 20% gratuity automatically included as a line item, as well as a final option to leave an additional tip. It is all so confusing, awkward, even. I find the idea that workers (waiters, guides …) provide better service in order to earn their tips false. People take pride in the work they do. I have never worked as a guide, but I imagine it is a passion-driven profession.

With the rant over, I have a couple of questions.

1. Is there an industry standard for tipping guides and/or are there regional differences?

2. Would it be reasonable to work out the final price with the guide prior to the day of fishing? In other words, could I ask the guide what they are expecting in total compensation? Asked yet another way, could I ask the guide, what is your time and knowledge worth?

Daniel Salazar
Fair Oaks

FISH WATER PEOPLE
PHOTO CONTEST

Stay tuned for later this summer when the competition begins! In the meantime, get out there and give us your best shot of California's rivers, fish, and the people you enjoy them with. Contest submission information and entry to follow at caltrout.org/photocontest

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Author Curtis Fong responds:

Thanks for your comments and questions! You raise some good points about guides being paid fairly for the work and services they perform, and yes, I agree tipping protocols have become confusing and potentially awkward with just about everyone asking for a tip these days. As a former waiter, tips comprised the bulk of my compensation as the hourly wage was far below minimum wage. However, just like with every guide I've had the pleasure of fishing with, the high level of service never wavered and was not calibrated in anticipation of a poor or generous tip.

Now, I'll do my best to answer your questions here.

In researching various fly-fishing industry sources, while tipping can vary based on the type of trip (float vs. wade, how much driving is involved, etc.), I would say at least $100 for a full day of guided fishing is standard. A generous tip would be 20-25% of the trip's cost. What I consider "a fat tip," for me, is anything more than 20%, and that's to acknowledge some extra effort put into ensuring I have a memorable day fishing.

Your second set of questions raises some interesting points. Personally, I've never tried negotiating the rate for a guided trip, so I don't think I can give you a definitive answer as every person and situation is different. In my experience, a fly-fishing guide is an expert with deep knowledge and a keenly unique skill set. They are going to work very hard to ensure you have as good a day fishing as possible. In that effort they will share knowledge, teach you to be a better angler, take responsibility for your safety (a guide once got between a rattlesnake and me and my daughter!), etc. You're paying for that expert's application of their knowledge and skills—and I for sure bumped up the tip for that guide who stood ground between my daughter and that rattler!

Thanks, again, for your comments and questions!

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To Read

THE ZEN OF FLYFISHING
By Peter Kaminsky
Reviewed by Sean Stiny
$15, Workman Publishing Company, 2025

ZEN ON THE WATER

Zen Buddhism affirms firsthand experience over abstract knowledge. Fly fishing rewards getting out on the water rather than staying put. Buddhism encourages awareness of the present moment. Feel the river flow past your waders, regard the aspen on the bank and the swallows swooping at dusk. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to realize one's state of awakening and liberation. Sounds like a week away from the office in a river somewhere. Finally, Zen Buddhism explores the interconnectedness of all things. This one goes without saying. “All things merge into one, and a river runs through it.”

The Zen of Flyfishing by Peter Kaminsky explores just that: What makes this oft crazy pursuit a spiritual endeavor rather than an absent-minded hobby, like golf.

“There is a Zen feeling that comes over you when things go right. Your body, rod, line, and fly are united in a transcendent few seconds.”

Fly fishing is a visual medium, to be sure. When I read the words of McGuane or Maclean or Gierach, I picture the stream and the brook and the brown in my noggin. Well, this book is a nice reprieve for my noggin. I have the photo right there on the next page, one of the cast and the landing and the landscape to which the author and the trout are privy.

Kaminsky’s book, in essence, is an anthology, a repertory of sorts. He weaves in personal essays, photos, anecdotes, and quotes to complete this almost pocket-size book. And none could continually be a more seductive subject for an anthology than fly fishing.

Included are a handful of fly-fishing quotes I hadn’t come across before turning his pages. Quotes from the likes of Virginia Woolf, whose name indeed sounds like a fly pattern, the Royal Woolf (I picture it used in Woolf’s native Great Britain for big browns in the rainy countryside). She wrote:

“Fishing teaches a stern morality; inculcates a remorseless honesty. The fault may be with ourselves. Why do I go on missing at the strike? If I had more delicacy in casting, more accuracy, if I had fished finer, should I have not done better? The answer is—Yes!”

Steve Schmidt, guide and outfitter:

“Those rivers I walk and cast a fly upon create magical moments—and not all revolve around catching a fish. Fishing just happens to be the lure that attracts me to them.”

And my favorite, from guide Justin Carfagnini, in the section about catch and release:

“I went fly fishing. I caught fish. I ate peanut butter M&M’s. Solid day.”

Fishing in the Catskills one Autumn, Kaminsky tells of the trout season ending, but staying on for ruffed grouse and woodcock. His shotgun misfires, and upon opening the break “it turned out that, in my rush, instead of a shell I had jammed in a package of Rolaids.” Sort of like fishing with a gummy worm instead of a nightcrawler.

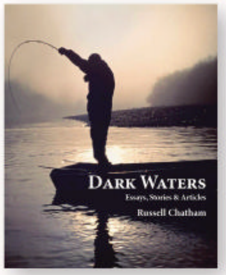
Comparing fly fishing to Zen Buddhism is somewhat clichéd, but not entirely erroneous. And Kaminsky uses his self-depreciating charm to bring us into the fold. He struggles with casting from time to time, gets broken off by a three-pound brown, contemplates eating a trout once in a while (“Breakfast was the real luxury: an omelet filled with smoked trout cheeks and garnished with minced chives.”), looks longingly at a tarpon or a striper in other parts of the world, and wonders why, after all these years, he’s still so fish crazy.

“There is no why to this; like faith, like love, it requires no proof. It just is—a species of sorcery that transports you out of the workaday world and into the place where dreams and visions arise.”

Appropriately, Kaminsky ends the book with a Nick Lyons quote. “The season is ended. There was not enough of it; there never is.”

Similar to finding a bit of Zen, similar to fly-fishing. But then, there’s always next season.

Sean Stiny grew up in Northern California, camping in Lassen and fly fishing along Hat Creek. Today he can be found along the McCloud or the Upper Sacramento, or leading a few ducks in the Sacramento Valley. A writer, woodworker, and owl box maker, he lives in Petaluma, California. His writing has appeared in *Backcountry Journal, Grit Magazine, Bend Magazine, Kelp Journal, Wild Roof Journal,* and *Cal Waterfowl.*



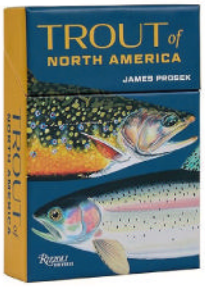
DARK WATERS: ESSAYS, STORIES, & ARTICLES

By Russell Chatham
New Foreword by
Terry McDonell
$22, Ice Cube Press
Re-released 2025

Russell Chatham was more than a writer—he was a legend in California fly fishing. With a painter's eye and an angler's heart, he captured the soul of wild places and the people drawn to them. In *Dark Waters*, first published in 1988 and now re-released, Chatham's evocative prose returns to remind us why his work still resonates.

Richard Anderson, founder of *California Fly Fisher*, had this to say about the first release of *Dark Waters* shared in the April 1997 issue, "With Russell Chatham's death, we lost a hugely talented individual, someone who was both icon and iconoclast, whose works have had a profound effect on many of us who care about where, why, and how we fish or hunt. The stories and essays collected in *Dark Waters* remain among the best of sporting literature, and often transcend 'mere' sport in how they weave inner life with outer world. If you have not yet read Russ's writing, you're in for a treat."

These essays are steeped in the landscapes and lore of California and the West, offering a rich, contemplative look at fly fishing, solitude, and the quiet drama of nature. For those who know the pull of wild rivers, Dark Waters remains essential reading.



TROUT OF NORTH AMERICA

By James Prosek
Reviewed by
Sean Stiny
$25, Rizzoli Universe, 2025

I'm getting a PhD in Troutology from UC McCloud, but I desperately need to memorize each trout species and their identifying marks before I present my dissertation at the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsmuir.

My dissertation is titled "The Impact of Beer Consumption on Identifying the Genus *Oncorhynchus*: A Pilot Study." The beers, easy to identify. Pabst and Tecate and Coors (genus *Yellowjacket*). The trout, not so much. I'm sure to fail without the help of James Prosek and his superb collection of trout cards.

Russell Chatham perfected landscapes. Val Atkinson mastered water through lenses. And one of the finest pure trout painters is New Englander James Prosek. His trout are still life, mouths agape, every stripe and dot and shade in its right place. His recent card set, "Trout of North America," provided flash cards for my beer-pickled brain to help secure my fabricated trout PhD. Cum laude no less.

Facetiousness aside, these cards aren't homework by any stretch. That little redband you caught in the McCloud, the one that seemed a bit darker along its back, that's actually a Sheepheaven Creek redband. And the golden trout you caught, the one you finally checked off your bucket list and was so brightly colored you had to squint, that was actually a Volcano Creek golden.

What's more, that Volcano Creek golden has the scientific name *Oncorhynchus aguabonita roosevelti*. That's 'Trout—Pretty Water—Teddy Roosevelt.' Yep, that ichthyologist named the species of one golden trout in one pretty little river in California after old Teddy.

Just two of the 60 cards, 60 species, in Prosek's collection, and I'm already a Troutologist. Trout I could have seen, may have caught, but were oblivious to their exact lineage and details of interest.

Fly fishing and art have always gone hand in hand. A speckled brook trout in a dappled stream, in watercolor. A white peak in the background of a high alpine lake, in oil. A quick pencil sketch of a Hat Creek trout while sitting next to the same riffle from which it just rose to slurp a pale morning dun. The mountains are indeed exquisite, the poplars and spruce are handsome, but it's the trout that are magic.

Turning over a third card and, say, that's no fuddy-duddy rainbow caught in salty Eagle Lake near Susanville, that's the famous Eagle Lake rainbow, adapted for generations to the alkaline lake. It loves its water briny. And that's not just a cutthroat caught while visiting your in-laws in Scottsdale. That's the once-endangered, now threatened, Apache trout, named for the tribe in the region who revered it. On the back of its card, Prosek writes:

"In 1871, President Ulysses S. Grant deeded more than 1.6 million acres in the White Mountains of Arizona to the Apache, who regarded this fish as sacred. Other anglers did not share this view, and in the past century, overfishing and hybridization have driven the Apache trout to the brink of extinction."

Prosek, a writer himself in addition to a painter (his 1997 book *Joe and Me* is first rate), has most likely painted the most trout species in watercolor in the history of trout. Some are silver, some have the Milky Way on their back, some look like their bellies are aflame, but each is distinct to their region and their ancestry.

Prosek quotes Meriwether Lewis from his journal on the Westslope cutthroat card:

"These trout are from 16 to 23 inches in length, precisely resemble our mountain speckled trout [brook trout] in form and the position of their fins, but the specks on these are of a deep black instead of the red or gold of those common in the United States."

We have websites now that trace our Homo sapien lineage. The trout have Prosek. He'll focus on the intricacies of their species and give face and flank to our catch-and-release quarry. The little tail spots, the lower band of red, the irregular angle of the dorsal fin that make each creature unique. Prosek is the Meriwether Lewis of trout species, exploring the unknowns and noting the specialties of what lies in his net.

Of the specific Alaskan rainbow, Prosek writes:

> *"They depend on salmon runs for food. Other forage items include insects, clams, small fish, voles, and lemmings."*

Voles and lemmings? Sounds like an eagle or an owl and not a damn rainbow trout.

So the next time I tighten a line in a river and expect a homogeneous result of a trout (usually a common rainbow, not that mammal-eating behemoth up north), Prosek proves otherwise. I'll take a half second longer when cradling the trout to inspect its markings before releasing it back to the cold swift current.

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RIFFLES

The Trout Vote With Their Fins

By Bill Barich

Fly fishers are a vigilant lot. We're always on the lookout for an ill-mannered angler who'll spoil our fun—the guy who puts down the trout with 42 false casts, for instance, or the one who has no sense of personal space and sets up shop three feet from your casting arm. Those offenses are tip-of-the-iceberg stuff, really. The catalog of bad manners is frightfully long, and everyone has a favorite gripe they'll be more than happy to share with anyone who'll listen.

For me, it's any talk of politics. If a fishing partner asks who I'll vote for in the next election, I say, "Abe Lincoln." I say that even if it's a local election. Only a witless pal would plunge ahead after that. The trout don't care what party you support. They vote with their fins. If you think they made life easier for fly fisher Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, than for Herbert Hoover, a Republican, I suggest you see a shrink.

I learned to avoid politics when I lived in Alexander Valley. My fishing partner there was a grumpy prune farmer I'll call Paul Deeds. Deeds got his news from the supermarket tabloids. He even read them at the store to save a buck. His taste in all things was simple and unrefined. He enjoyed sushi, but "only if it's cooked." He didn't own a computer or a cell phone, relying on a landline he only answered if you know the code—ring twice, hang up, and ring again.

I met Deeds on the Russian. He's a steelhead master and taught me the ropes. Soon we began taking road trips to fish for trout. That was a big deal for Paul, who clings to the valley like a barnacle. He worries his trees won't bear fruit if he goes away. They'll feel neglected, he says. This is clearly a case of magical thinking, but you can't blame people for wanting things to turn out well. Every farmer is a magical thinker to some extent.

I recall a trip Deeds and I made a few years ago to the Middle Fork Stanislaus, the wild trout section below Beardsley Lake. It was early summer, and the river couldn't be in better shape. After walking a half-mile or so from Sandbar Flat through the forest, we noticed a little hatch of BWOs and began picking up small browns and a few rainbows in the pocket water. None was worthy of a photo, but we had the stream to ourselves and took pleasure in the splendid sense of isolation.

Although Deeds may not be the most well-informed person, he's never short of an opinion. The opinions are delivered with surprising force, considering they rest on such a shaky foundation. It's best to regard them as passing clouds and not take them seriously as I made the mistake of doing when he pointed to the Middle Fork on our lunch break and said, "See that river? Have a good look. 'Cause it'll dry up when Governor Moonbeam sells our water to L.A."

He was talking about Jerry Brown, then in his third term. "I doubt that's what Brown has in mind," I objected.

"I don't trust him. He's a Buddhist."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Ever seen a Buddhist with a fly rod?" He was delighted with himself, thinking he'd scored a point. "You know who'd be a great governor? Tom Hanks. Born in California, he's eligible to run."

"You don't have to be born here to run for office."

"Be that as it may. Ever wonder why Hanks always plays a good guy?" He paused for effect. "Because he is a good guy!"

We fished in silence that afternoon. I kicked myself for arguing with him. I should've kept my mouth shut. Deeds might be eccentric, but he doesn't invest in any wacky conspiracy theories. He's an original. And it doesn't sound so far-fetched now, in 2025, to suggest Tom Hanks might run for office someday.

Our feuding ended when Deeds caught an 18" brown on a Parachute Adams as the light began to fade. Nothing restores one's faith in humanity like a trout worth bragging about. I can assure you Deeds took full advantage, recounting his triumph at exhausting length on the drive home.

Never again have I tolerated any talk of politics on a stream. I imagine Jimmy Carter instituted a similar ban. If his guide had asked, "How did it go with the Shah of Iran?," he'd plant his next cast in the bushes. Carter was an expert at casting, in fact, and took a few lessons from George Harvey of Penn State, who taught the first-ever fly fishing course at a university. He lost his favorite rod, a specially crafted H.L. Leonard bamboo, when a thief pilfered it on its way from Washington to Plains, Georgia.

Herbert Hoover put a hundred miles between himself and the White House as soon as he was elected, paying for 164 acres of land and the materials to build a rustic retreat in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He settled on a site near the headwaters of the Rapidan River in Virginia, known for its native brookies. Hoover often ditched an Oval Office meeting if he heard there was a good hatch on the Rapidan.

He made creative use of the Marines, putting them to work as his construction crew and writing it off as a "military exercise." Camp Hoover grew to include a lodge, cabins, mess halls, hiking trails, concrete-lined trout pools, and a miniature golf course. Later, he added a school for the kids living with pioneer families in the deep woods.

The river was too low to fish by early summer, but that didn't stop Hoover from entertaining celebrities like Thomas Edison, Charles Lindbergh, and Winston Churchill.

President Herbert Hoover fishing at Camp Rapidan, VA. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, photograph by Harris & Ewing, [reproduction number, e.g., LC-USZ62-12345]

He loved having a hideout far from D.C. and the demands of his job. As a youth, he'd lived with his wife in remote mining camps for over 10 years, working as an engineer. His need for a space to reflect first developed there.

"Fishing seems to be the sole avenue left to Presidents," wrote Hoover, "through which they may escape to their own thoughts and may live in their own imaginings and find relief from the pneumatic hammering of personal contacts." The camp is located in Shenandoah National Park and is open to the public, with three of the original cabins still standing.

Reading about Hoover's retreat almost made me want to run for office. How fine it would be to have my own little camp in the High Sierra with a bunch of Marines to drive off any trespassers and keep the best holes safe for me. I lack the excuse of too much pneumatic hammering in my life, only a desire for the peaceful solitude a stream like the Rapidan can bring. I have no trouble picturing myself trekking through the woods and casting to a rising native brookie.

In reality, though, I'll spend my fishing trips camping or staying at the sort of budget motels that crop up like dandelions near rivers and lakes in the mountains, habitable places severely lacking in any luxury and often featuring one or more defect such as a bathroom door that won't close properly or a lumpy mattress that makes sleep all but impossible. But that's a small price to pay for having a trout stream in your backyard.

Bill has written for *California Fly Fisher* for almost 10 years. To read some of his past articles, scan the code below.

Smart Bass

By Robert Ketley

A largemouth bass in a local pond or lake may be the smartest fish you'll ever face.

No doubt, some will scoff at such a statement. Anyone who has fished a woolly bugger in a pond knows small bass can be easy to catch. Of course, the same gear also catches plenty of small trout. Larger fish are more difficult to fool and become even more challenging when the water body gets a lot of fishing pressure. Some of this is because the fish learn to avoid certain flies and presentations, but that's only part of the story.

Biologists have shown that the feeding behavior of individual fish ranges from bold to timid. The bold risk-takers are generally easier to catch, while the timid ones can test your patience. In waters where angling is very popular, the bolder fish are more likely to end up on the table or to die from poor catch-and-release practices. As a result, the remaining population will have a higher proportion of timid, harder-to-catch fish. It has also been shown that timid fish produce timid offspring. This means the proportion of bold fish will continue to decrease, generation after generation, until a new bold/timid equilibrium is reached. Simply put, the more heavily a body of water is fished, the harder the fishing gets.

So what's so special about bass? The popularity of largemouth bass fishing means the waters they inhabit are often subject to more fishing pressure than most trout streams. Regardless of whether it's a one-pound bass in a local pond or a three-pounder in a nearby lake, fooling these fish can stretch your fishing skills to the limit. If you are looking for a new challenge and this sounds like your kind of thing, here are a few tips to get you started.

To find bass, look at the surrounding lands and visualize how the ground slopes as it extends beneath the water.
Photo by Robert Ketley

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Watching where conventional anglers fish is an obvious way to find bass. Most of the time, they'll be casting towards large pieces of structure, such as downed trees, docks, or rock outcrops. Not surprisingly, these spots get pounded, so you may need to be the first angler on the water to have a decent chance. The fish probably don't see many flies, which can help, but once the water's been disturbed, they'll probably be extra spooky.

REMOVE THE WATER

Fortunately, there are often good spots that regular anglers don't notice. To find them, you need to "see" things you can't see. Stand by a stream, and the currents give you a good idea of where to cast. The lack of moving water can make ponds and lakes harder to read, but evolution has preloaded a neat solution in your brain. Instead of looking over the water, mentally remove it and "see" the land beneath. This mind's eye map helped our hunter-gatherer ancestors find food, and it can help you find fish.

Start by looking at the surrounding lands and visualize how the ground slopes as it extends beneath the water. Steep slopes provide deeper water closer to shore, while gentle gradients create shallows. Points or promontories produce a finger of shallower water, with steep side slopes. Pretty soon, you'll see the underwater scene as easily as if you were looking over dry land.

PATTERNS AND LIGHT

Once you have the map's contours sorted out, look for pattern changes in lakeside vegetation. Willows or bright green vegetation will often reveal small creeks and ephemeral streams. In winter, these creeks bring earthworms and grubs into the lake, while in summer, their underground flows can feed underwater springs with cool water.

Adjacent wetlands often connect to the main water body through shallow channels. These can provide bass food, such as dragonflies, crayfish, rodents, small fish, and amphibians. Reeds and aquatic plants often create bands of vegetation along the bankside and can hold a lot of food. Bass will often patrol the edge of this vegetation or select specific areas to ambush prey.

The shadows from trees provide a transition between sunlit and shaded water, which bass will often use to ambush prey. As you get more familiar with the water, you'll start to notice less obvious elements, such as sunken tree limbs, solitary rocks, or old root wads. These can hold big bass. This point was driven home when I spent a day on an electrofishing boat. We stunned a lot of large bass in places that, at first glance, didn't look at all "bassy."

Structure fishing is interesting, but it's not the only game in town. Bass can also be found in open waters with no discernible structure. To fish these areas effectively, you need to work the water methodically. Move a yard or so every few casts to ensure you cover as much water as possible. Fan casting can help, especially if bankside access is limited.

RODS AND LINES

Largemouth bass from a heavily fished public water. Photo by Robert Ketley

Most modern 6 or 7-weight rods are capable of handling large bass and large flies. As for reels, anything with the capacity for a 7wt line is fine. Don't worry too much about the drag, a bass fight is more about Mike Tyson power than Usain Bolt speed. When it comes to lines, it's nice to have a floater and a medium-fast sinker, but if you are limited to just one line, make it the sinker. Floating lines are great for fishing topwater, but, like trout, the majority of fish will be caught on subsurface flies.

FLY SELECTION

Largemouth bass will eat pretty much anything that moves, such as dragonflies, crayfish, bluegills, frogs, salamanders, earthworms, birds, snakes, young bass, and, in some lakes, planted trout. That list should give most fly tyers plenty to work on. While it generally doesn't hurt to tie realistic patterns, don't add claws to your crayfish flies. It's been shown that bass prefer prey that doesn't bite back.

For folks who don't tie flies, there's a decent selection of bass and pike flies that do a good job. Make sure your fly box has some two-inch long streamers and critter flies, a few poppers or gurglers, and a handful of four-inch plus streamers.

Your fly needs to move enticingly to seal the deal. For creature flies fished along the bottom, a lot can be accomplished through the retrieve. While dragonfly nymphs and crayfish move rapidly in response to threats, their normal pace is more leisurely. A hand-twist retrieve that moves the fly about two inches per second is a good starting point. If that doesn't work, slow down or speed up. Every 20-30 seconds, make a quick strip to move the fly a foot or so. This can trigger a bass to strike. Bites can be subtle ticks, a momentary loss of connection, or, more rarely, a solid thump.

The fly will often be moving over twigs, weeds, and rocks, so a weedless pattern, or one tied with a weedless knot, is the way to go. For more info on weedless knots, check out the Winter 2025 issue of *California Fly Fisher*, conveniently located in the online archives.

Things get a bit more complicated with baitfish patterns. The natural inclination of many tyers is to tie established streamer patterns. This is a good starting point, but how a fly looks is often secondary to the way it moves. Many streamers that work in rivers aren't quite as lively in still water. Smart bass will follow these flies but may not attack them. A fly with some side-to-side action, like a Wobble Fly, Tullis Wiggle Bug, or Gamechanger, is often a better choice.

Don't get stuck in a metronome retrieve; it seldom increases your chances. Vary the retrieve so the fly stops, slows, or darts every few seconds. Bites are generally solid thumps, but it's best to strike whenever something feels different.

Another important factor is buoyancy. Sometimes bass want a fly that hovers in place or barely rises or falls when you stop your retrieve, which is how real baitfish behave. Bass will often strike when you start to move the fly after a short pause. In a pinch, you can use adhesive-backed foam sheeting to offset the weight of the hook.

When it comes to leaders, you want a setup that allows you to cast relatively accurately with a heavy fly. Six to eight feet of straight 10-pound monofilament is usually fine for topwater and midwater fishing. If you need a heavier butt section, four feet of 30-pound monofilament should do the trick. When working flies along the bottom, it's hard to beat three or four feet of 10-pound mono.

DEPTH

How deep the fish will be varies throughout the day and season. Topwater action is usually best in the early morning or evening, especially in the summer months. Early mornings are also when bass can be found very close to shore, but they will spook easily. A floating line is the obvious choice for this situation.

If the bass aren't feeding on top, you'll generally do better with a sinking line. Don't immediately assume you need to fish on the bottom, the fish can be anywhere in the water column. This is when you use the countdown method to present a baitfish pattern. Start with a count that allows the fly to get down a couple of feet, and add a foot or so on each cast until your fly touches bottom. When you hook a fish or get a grab, make a few more casts to the same spot, using the same count. You may have located a school.

BITE DETECTION

Detecting soft bites can be a problem when fishing on the bottom. The main reason is slack, which is caused by line sag. Density-compensated lines are less prone to sag and are worth adding to your arsenal. Keep the rod tip in the water, so the line forms an almost straight path between the fly and your hands.

Another solution for line sag is to use an 18-inch-long shooting head attached to clear monofilament shooting line. Mount the fly above the head, and you have a fly-fishing version of the conventional angler's drop shot rig. The direct connection to the fly helps you detect bites that would be almost impossible to feel with a regular fly line. Another advantage of this setup is that it doesn't require a backcast, which makes it especially useful for bank fishing where access to the water is through small openings in trees and bushes. A full description of this setup (Shrunken Heads) is in the October 2020 edition, available in the online archives.

If this all sounds too simple, perhaps you should concentrate on smart carp. Apparently, it can take decades of fishing to catch the smartest ones.

Scan the QR code for more articles by Robert Ketley

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POEM

Release

By Keith Shein

(for Dick Rohrbaugh)

The eyes won't blink,
so I can't look
at the endless black

of the trout's eye as
I release it but admire
the red of its stripe

or buttery flank—
as if such eyes open
questions and, always,

my answers have wet,
empty hands—lifting
joy to such longing

and loss, seeing
drift away what
I miss, even held.

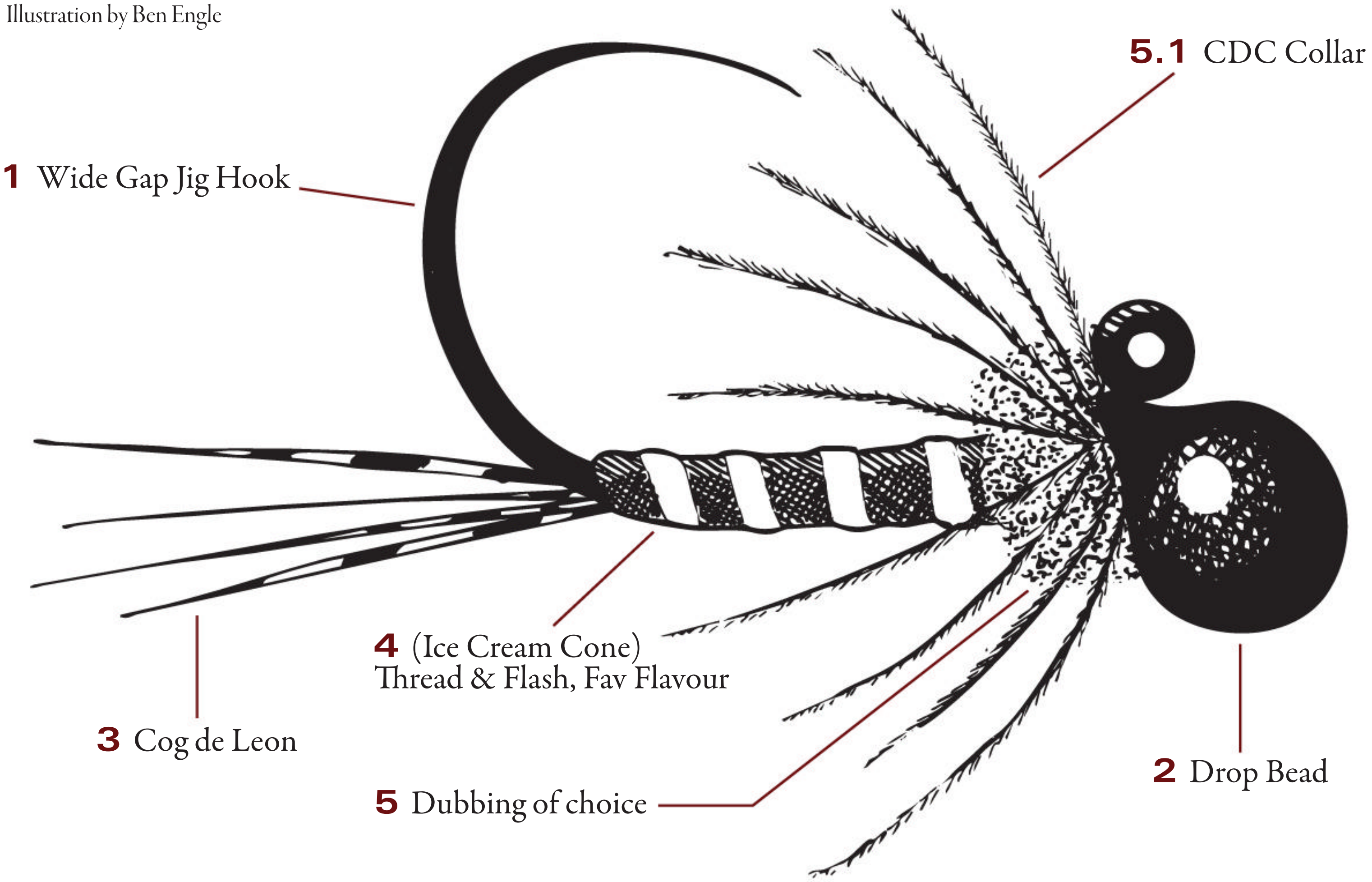
Blind love, so hungry
for touch, the shapes
made of light.

AT THE VISE

Euro Nymphing

More Than Just a Trend

By Matt Callies
Illustration by Ben Engle



Euro nymphing and Euro nymphs have become a staple in almost every angler's toolkit, whether you're chasing trophies or just out to enjoy your local water. You don't have to be a competitive-level fly fisher to appreciate what these techniques and patterns bring to the table.

When I moved to Northern California 23 years ago, I found myself on the Upper Sacramento River and in the capable hands of the Ted Fay Fly Shop in Dunsmuir. That's where I met Bob Grace and Joe Kimsey, who introduced me to the local style: high-sticking heavy bugs in pocket water—drifting them right into the mouths of healthy trout.

Not long after I got the hang of high-sticking, Euro nymphing got a bump in popularity. Guys like Andy Burke were innovating with fast-sinking flies, long rods, and leader setups meant to give anglers maximum contact with their flies.

Today, the Euro setup has evolved even more. We now have 10 to 11-foot rods with specialized tapers, designed to deliver flies with pinpoint accuracy. Reels are now built to balance those rods and reduce arm fatigue. Lines have gotten thinner for less sag and more sensitivity—and that means better strike detection.

Fly fishing has always felt like a tribal pursuit to me, and Euro nymphing definitely has its own tribe. Whether you're all in or just curious, it makes a ton of sense from a design standpoint. I like to think of fly fishing like golf—you've got different clubs (or flies and rigs) for different situations. Euro gear is just another tool, and in many cases, it's the best one for the job.

DESIGNING EURO FLIES: QUICK, STREAMLINED, AND EFFECTIVE

These flies are built to get down to the fish—fast. When I look at fly patterns for Euro nymphing, I consider weight, hook gap, and how well the fly slices through the water, especially in complex currents. Fish spend most of their time near the bottom, so getting your fly down is everything.

Take something simple like a Perdigon. When I tie these, I make multiple versions of the same pattern and hook size, but with different bead sizes. That way, if a fly is working in slower water, I can swap to a heavier version of the same fly for faster runs without changing my whole setup. I organize my boxes by pattern and bead weight—no calipers needed (though I won't judge your nerd level if you do use them).

If this feels like too much, no worries—plenty of fly shops now sell these patterns in multiple bead sizes, ready to fish. Just like golfers carry different wedges, it helps to have multiple versions of a pattern to suit different scenarios.

1. HOOKS: THE FOUNDATION

Euro hooks come in tons of shapes and wire gauges. Some are built like dry-fly hooks—thin wire, ideal for light tippet and softer rods. Others are beefed up to handle bigger fish and stronger currents. Two of my favorites:

- Fulling Mill FM5125 – 90° eye makes it great for holding larger beads
- Fulling Mill FM5045 – a solid all-arounder

These are versatile, reliable hooks that I use for most of my tying. Anecdotally (read: not scientific), I've noticed jig-style hooks seem to hold fish better—maybe it's the angle?

That's just from guiding my kids and paying attention to how the fish stay pinned.

2. BEADS: IT'S ALL ABOUT TUNGSTEN

There are four main bead styles, but only one material you should be using: Tungsten.

These flies are like muscle cars—they're all about weight-to-speed ratio. You want mass, and you want it packed into a streamlined body. Here's a quick breakdown:

- Standard round tungsten – not my go-to due to hook compatibility
- Slotted tungsten – great option, but the slot reduces weight slightly
- Tactical Drop / Instajig beads – my favorite. They shift the bead's weight forward for better balance and ride. Super heavy in a small profile
- Jig Backs – more like a weight system than a bead. They add size to your fly but are unmatched for getting deep fast

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3. TAILS: SUBTLE OR LOUD—YOUR CALL

Tails on Euro flies act like rudders. I keep it simple:

- Glo-Brite Floss for bright, flashy attractor patterns
- Coq de Leon for a natural look with durability

Don't overthink it. Fish don't have hands—they'll eat it or they won't. A few fibers (four or five) are all you need.

4. BODIES: SLIM SINKS QUICKER

Body materials affect how fast your fly sinks. The thinner the body, the quicker it gets down. Options include:

- Natural quills (soak them first!)
- Thread (plain or flashy)
- Pseudo quills
- Fine wire
- Sparse dubbing (mostly for thorax)

I avoid bulky dubbing except on bigger patterns like stoneflies, where I offset the drag with a heavier bead.

5. THORAX; COLLARS: SMALL TWEAKS, BIG IMPACT

This is where you can get creative. I use CDC or micro dubbing loops to build collars—either to mimic a thorax or just to add a hot spot. You can change the whole vibe of a fly with a different collar color, even if the rest stays the same. This is where the fun is. A little trial and error here leads to better flies and a better understanding of what works.

FINISH STRONG: UV RESINS

Finishing flies has gotten a big upgrade thanks to UV resins. These let you build or coat specific parts of your fly quickly and cleanly. I use Loon Outdoors' Thin, Thick, and Flow, plus their colored resins for hot spots or accents.

Pro tip: Invest in a good UV light. Not all lights cure resin equally. The best ones output UV at the right wavelength to fully cure your resin—no tacky mess.

FINAL THOUGHTS: TRY IT OUT

Euro nymphing may seem like a trend, but it's here to stay—and for good reason. Whether you view it as progression or regression probably depends on how you learned to fish.

The flies are quick to tie, use minimal materials, and just flat-out work. Think of them like trout ice cream cones—pick your flavor, mix it up, and have fun with it.

Scan the QR code for a link to the Loon fly tying video

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Photo: Val Atkinson

My Fly-Fishing Perspective

By John Fellner

Euro nymphing can be a polarizing term for many fly anglers.

With his father as his eyes, Reid navigates the river. Photo courtesy John Fellner

Some argue that it is not fly fishing because you aren't casting fly line with your fly rod. Others will say I am using flies and using a fly rod, so how is it not fly fishing? For me (and many others), I simply refer to it as tight line nymphing; it's just another way to get your flies to the fish. There are many ways to present your flies, and in my opinion, there is no wrong way as long as you are enjoying the experience and hopefully bringing a fish or two to the net. My evolution to tight line nymphing, however, came for a very specific reason.

I first met Craig Ballenger in 2001 at the Shasta Springs Trout Camp, where he hosted a group of us for the weekend. At that time, I had been fly fishing for about 15 years, primarily using dry flies and occasionally nymphs with an indicator (or bobber, as Craig relentlessly called it). I was decent with dry flies and fairly mediocre with nymphs, but I had an insatiable curiosity about improving both skills. There were plenty of books that surely helped, but there were no online instructional videos back then. You learned by trial and error or by meeting someone like Craig, who was willing to share his extensive knowledge gained from years of fly fishing.

He offered to take me out on the Upper Sacramento River and show me some things. This is when I was introduced to high stick nymphing. I won't bore you with the details of high stick nymphing (a version of nymphing with split shot and no bobber), and I'm sure most of you know how it's done, but learning the technique from Craig was a tremendous boost to my fly-fishing learning curve. He had been fishing this way with nymphs ever since he started fly fishing. It is a technique that most claim originated on the Upper Sac, and there I was learning it from a master. Craig and I became fast friends from that first encounter, and we fished together many times over the years. He would often call me, mostly to complain about Bay Area sports teams, sometimes to provide water flow and hatch updates, but always asking me to come fishing. He seemed to forget I lived about four hours away, but I truly appreciated the offers.

My son Reid was born in 2001. He is the youngest of my three children and had a typical early childhood growing up in the suburbs with two older sisters. That all quickly changed in 2010 when Reid suddenly began having problems with his vision. He told us that everything looked blurry. We thought he was having issues with his prescription glasses, so we took him to the ophthalmologist. It was there that we learned we needed to see a specialist. The specialist informed us that Reid had a rare genetic condition called Stargardt Disease, which is essentially a juvenile form of macular degeneration. He had lost his central vision and would have blurred peripheral vision. His corrected vision decreased from 20/20 to 20/400, with no treatments or cures available. My children grew up camping and fishing from a very early age, walking small streams with me in a backpack until they were old enough to navigate the creeks safely on their own. They were all introduced to fly fishing early, but they didn't become comfortable with a fly rod until their early teenage years. Reid was always enthusiastic about catching trout. His visual impairment prevented him from tying a fly on the line, seeing a bobber, or spotting a fly on the water. When he was younger, I would hook a trout and let him bring it in. When he became skilled enough to accurately cast a dry fly, I would yell "Now" when I saw the strike, and he would then set. He really enjoyed it, but he always wanted to be more independent on the water and catch fish on his own.

When Reid was 12, I had the opportunity to take him fishing on the Upper Sac with Craig. He was eager to guide Reid, but Craig was never sure what to do with children when he took them out on the river. He always worried that something would go wrong on his watch. We went down to the river, and I kept a good distance away from the two of them so I could watch without being the overbearing father. Well, about four steps in, Reid fell into the river a little behind Craig and just stayed there for a moment in the water. I got a little closer and could see Craig's concern. He reached Reid and asked him if he was okay, to which Reid replied, "yeah, I'm fine. I was just looking at this cool plant growing on the rocks." I could hear Craig chuckle with a sigh of relief. He later told me in his own words, "Dear God, I thought I had killed him."

Once the two were settled, Craig began teaching him the methods of high sticking. I had instructed Reid on the basics of this technique since I found it to be a good way for him to fly fish within his visual limitations. At that point, he had only been trying it for a couple of years and was experiencing some success. I did my best to help him, but I was his dad, not his teacher, and for those of you with children, I think you understand the difference. The rig with two flies and split shot can be challenging to cast accurately, especially for a younger angler. Craig worked with him all afternoon, refining his cast, teaching him to adjust his depth with simple arm movements, and as Craig liked to put it, "immediately fishing the flies." Reid learned a lot that day, and the two of them hit it off. We all fished together several times over the next few years, and it was a highlight for both me and Reid. Craig was astounded and intrigued by Reid's ability to navigate life with his visual impairment.

In 2016, I came across an article describing Euro nymphing as a relatively new technique for fly fishing in the US. It was a bit confusing for me to fully understand the concepts and rigging, as I had relied on split shot for most of my nymphing practices. At that time, I couldn't find any videos that would shorten the learning curve. In the summer of 2017, I decided to commit to trying this "new" technique. Like anything new, it was initially quite a struggle. I wasn't using the right amount of weight on the flies, and my drifts were inconsistent. Over a short period, things started to make more sense, and catching fish became somewhat predictable. The main difference I noticed from high sticking was that I was in contact with my flies rather than the split shot. It was that "feeling" that gave me my aha moment. This approach would be perfect for Reid to use when fly fishing. Because of his experience with high sticking, he adapted to tight lining quite quickly. It was much easier for him to cast, and there was less line to get tangled at his feet. The line between the flies and his fingertips was much thinner and more sensitive for feeling strikes. I will never forget the day in the summer of 2019 when it all clicked for him. We were fishing on the South Fork of Battle Creek, and he really wanted to fish on his own without anyone helping him. I sat with a friend on the bank, and we watched Reid clamber onto a rock in the middle of the river. He identified the drift, as he could differentiate between the white water and the darker water, and he knew where he wanted his flies to go. He proceeded to catch six fish in seven casts in that spot. It was an emotional moment for me as I realized that since Reid's Stargardt diagnosis, I had spent nine years trying to give him independence and access to a very challenging sport that he really loved.

Reid went off to Colorado State in 2020, but he came home that first summer. Craig asked if we could make it up to Dunsmuir for a little fishing. We hadn't all fished together since Reid embraced tight lining. I was excited to tell him about his young disciple's maturation. Craig was familiar with tight lining but wasn't a convert or believer by any means; however, as a gatherer of knowledge, he was curious to learn more about this method and see Reid in action. After a detailed explanation, both philosophical and visual, Craig's response was, "Hmmm, let's go fishing." We headed down to a hole on the Upper Sac, a few hundred yards above Mossbrae Falls. Craig said he would let Reid go first, and they would fish this eight to 10-yard hole to see whether tight lining or high sticking would be more successful. Reid did quite well, much to Craig's surprise, as he landed five fish. Craig wasn't going to be outfished, though, and he landed five as well. He and Reid backed out of the hole and onto the bank where I was sitting and watching. Craig lit up a cigarette, contemplated the results of the two methods, and asked, "So, what did we learn?" I replied, "Not much … the fishing is good today."

There are many ways to present your flies to the fish, whether focusing on surface presentations or subsurface presentations. You can choose to make the perfect dry fly cast with a dead drift, strip streamers, indicator fish, high stick, or tight line. Regardless, each method poses different challenges for the angler and requires a variety of skills. I was fortunate to be exposed to a wide range of tips and tactics, especially from someone like Craig Ballenger. I had a unique reason to pursue a deliberate technique as a possible solution for Reid. He and I are both glad we found one that helps him enjoy the experience. After all, it's just fly fishing.

SPOTLIGHT DESTINATION

The Wild Forks of Kern

By Tim Huckaby

You have to earn the privilege of fishing the Upper Kern enduring a challenging hike to the river. Photo by Valerie Rose Hirschberg

I'm in a 25+ year love affair. She's wild and she's fun. But she's fickle.

From mid-November to mid-July, she is mostly nasty and dangerous. But even though she is a raging torrent of death in this long stretch, I daydream about her every day. Come August, I want to see her every day for over three straight months until she gets mean again. Every decade or so, she is on fire like the mythical goddess Pele. After the fires, I have to wait two years to see her. She's also hard to get to. You can't drive to her. You have to earn the privilege to see her by carrying over 35 pounds on your back and hiking for miles.

I'm talking about the wild section of the Upper Kern River in the Golden Trout Wilderness of California's Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

ABOUT THE KERN RIVER

The North Fork of the Kern River (often called "Main Fork") has a total length of 165 miles. It drains Mount Whitney, which at 14,505 feet is the tallest mountain in the contiguous United States. With its headwaters at Lake South America, the Kern is the only major river in the Sierra Nevada that flows south. The Kern cuts along the Great Western Divide, flowing into Lake Isabella in Kernville, where the South Fork joins, then continues on to the San Joaquin Valley, where the demands of farming consume it.

Originally named "Rio de San Felipe," it was renamed in 1845 by explorer John C. Fremont after his typographer Edward M. Kern nearly drowned in the river.

In 1987, Congress designated 151 miles of the Kern's Main Fork as a National Wild and Scenic River under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This designation helps protect the river's natural beauty, cultural value, and ecological integrity, ensuring its free-flowing condition, which means it cannot be dammed.

The Wild Section of the Upper Kern River is the focus of this article. The Wild Section starts at the headwaters flowing from the base of Mt. Whitney and ends 5,600 feet upstream of the Johnsondale Bridge (JDB). It is surrounded by both the Golden Trout Wilderness Area and Sequoia National Park. The Fairview dam, three miles downstream from the JDB on Mountain Highway 99, protects the wild section from the prolific trout stockings in the recreational section below. The recreational section is 20.9 miles in length and flows through the tiny mountain town of Kernville.

While there has been some stocking of trout in the wild section above Fairview Dam in the last century, it hasn't occurred in many years. There are a few huge waterfalls upstream that help isolate the wild, pure strains. But, you know how Mother Nature works miracles: Many salmonoid species have made it above 100+ waterfalls, causing scientists to scratch their heads.

The majority of trout in the Upper Kern River are not only wild but are native and are a unique subspecies of trout for your bucket list. They may not all be pure strain in the lower portion of the wild section of the river. But the entire wild section contains wild natives that fight like hell and spawn naturally.

Remote and wild, you're likely to have the river all to yourself. Photo by Bill Bennett

WILD NATIVES: THE THREE SPECIES OF GOLDEN TROUT

There are three unique species of golden trout native to the Kern River watershed. The California golden trout—the state fish, the Little Kern golden trout, and the "not so golden" Kern River rainbow. So, how did these unique subspecies of trout come to be? Thousands of years ago, a combination of plate tectonics, earthquakes, volcanic activity, and glaciation locked in the coastal rainbows and Sheepheaven redband trout and locked out the anadromous natives. That isolation caused the evolution of these three trout sub-species into specific areas: the Little Kern golden trout into the Little Kern River; the golden trout to the Golden Trout Wilderness area, specifically Volcano and Golden Trout Creeks; and the Kern River rainbow to the Upper Kern River.

I have been lucky to fly fish all over the world. In my opinion, nothing fights harder and longer than a Kern River rainbow (KRR), and the wild section of the Kern River is dominated by them. They get big like anadromous steelhead, and they fight like steelhead too. They will run you up or down river into your backing if you don't chase them. And chasing them on this wild river is often impossible. The results are not typically good when you try to slow them down with the reel. They jump more than any trout I have seen. I once had a big KRR jump towards the end of a fight, up 10 feet and over a tree branch and snap me off. They'll fight you right to your feet, never giving up and continuing the fight while in the net. Even the most experienced fly fishers will tell you a 50% hook-to-landing ratio is good in the wild section of the Kern.

One difference between the Kern River rainbow and steelhead is that you can catch KRRs on dry flies—and with a good cast and drift, you can hook a lot of them. Thirty-plus fish days aren't unusual for experienced anglers, and even beginners can fool fish here. I have caught KRRs to 24 inches, though some of the old timers claim they've seen fish pushing 30. The fly fishing on the wild section of the Kern is just fantastic. Why? There are plenty of reasons, but a major one is that these fish just don't see many artificial flies. So if you get your cast in the right lane, with a good drift that matches the natural flow, you will get takes.

While DNA testing is the only way to identify a pure-strain Kern River rainbow, Steve Schalla of FlyFishingTheSierra.com, who is extremely knowledgeable about the area having hiked and fly fished more of the Sierra Nevada than any human I know, provides this guidance: "Short of the fight, the best way to identify a pure strain KRR is 'head to toe spots,'" meaning small spots from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail both above and below the lateral line.

KERN
RIVER
335
LOST
SINCE 1968
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KERN COUNTY SHERIFF SEARCH & RESCUE
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Since 1968, the Kern has claimed 342 lives, which has risen by seven since the author started writing this article. Photo by Tim Huckaby

THE BAD NEWS

So, what's the bad news? Well, you can't drive to the wild section of the Kern River. There are no roads into California's Golden Trout Wilderness—you have to earn it by hiking it.

My go-to spot on the upper Kern River is the upper section above the confluence of the Little Kern River, known as the Forks of the Kern and accessed by a trail of the same name.

This section, while a wild and scenic river, is also a designated Heritage and Wild Trout Water by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. In the first two miles of the Forks of the Kern Trail, you drop 1,100 feet as you descend into Kern Canyon. That's not a big deal—until you have to hike back out. Doing so in the heat of summer, with 35+ pounds on your back and fully exposed to the sun, is no joke. Sure, there are folks who day hike it. But even when I was young and fit, climbing back out after fishing all day was tough. That's why most fly fishers choose to backpack in and overnight it.

Once you reach the river, you'll find yourself at the confluence of the Little Kern and the Main Fork of the Kern. And that's your next challenge: The trail includes a river crossing of the Little Kern. From August through the season close on November 15th, that typically means a simple shuffle getting wet below the knees. But in spring, the crossing can be difficult—if not impossible—to do safely.

Keep in mind the Upper Kern can rage near 20,000 cfs during spring runoff and back all the way down below 150 cfs in the same year. At high flows, the Kern is a dangerous river. Since 1968, the Kern has claimed 342 lives, which has risen by seven since I started writing this article—and that number will continue to rise. This river demands respect.

Forks of Kern | Quick Guide

Trailhead and Camping

The Forks of the Kern Trailhead is a 1-hour drive north from Kernville. Although 4WD is not required, the turn off to the trailhead from the road (22S82) is ~2 miles of dirt road and consequently subject to weather. There is a large dirt parking lot near the trailhead with a pit toilet nearby and a few primitive campsites.

The Forest Service has a number of dispersed camping sites within 15 miles of the trailhead on Forest Route 22S82. Lower Peppermint Creek Campground is 10 miles from the Forks Trailhead with water and pit toilets.

Reserve sites at Recreation.gov.

Access Maps

The Southern Sierra Region 1 map from FlyFishingTheSierra.com details fishing access points and landmarks on waterproof and tear-resistant paper.

Seasons

The season typically spans the last weekend in April to November 15th. The opening is dependent on the Forest Service's ability to clear the road—plowing snow, clearing rocks, and removing deadfall. The season closing is dependent on the weather.

Permits, Licenses, and Regulations

Along with a California fishing licencse, a Golden Trout Wilderness Permit is required to access this magical place. They are free. The Forks trail is not subject to trail quotas like the more famous trails in the Sierra Nevada.

You can find the details and the application for the GTW permit on the Forest Service website.

There are many ways to apply for your GTW permit, including in person. But, I have found the easiest way is by email:

Email your completed permit application to Sequoia National Forest at SM.FS.SequoiaNF@usda.gov. The Forest Service Visitor Center Staff monitors this email address Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. They will return your completed permit within a week. The Forest Service will also advise you of road closures, fires, and fire permit bans. They can be reached at (559)-539-2607.

You'll also need a California Fire Permit, even if you are only going to use a small backpacking stove. The fire permit is free and easy to obtain online after a simple common-sense test at ReadyForWildfire.org.

Heads up: In high fire-danger periods, which are common to this area, the Forest Service will suspend fire permits. This will prevent you from having campfires or even using a backpacking stove.

Fishing regulations for California are complex and dynamic. It's always best to check them for yourself here: Eregulations.com/California/Fishing/Freshwater-Sport-Fishing-Regulations

The rules for the wild section of the Upper Kern are straightforward: Flies: only single-hook artificial lures (flies) with barbless hooks may be used. Take: two trout maximum per day. Maximum size limit: 10 inches total length for trout only.

Huck Flies

You can purchase all the flies mentioned in this article, including Upper Kern River combination specials at TimHuckaby.com/shop. If you want to tie the Huck Hopper yourself watch the video in the online article.

Fly Shop

For all your angling needs, stop in Kern River Fly Shop. The friendly staff will get you well-equipped for your trip. 11301 Kernville Rd, Kernville, 760-376-2040. Open 8 a.m. - 5 p.m. every day.

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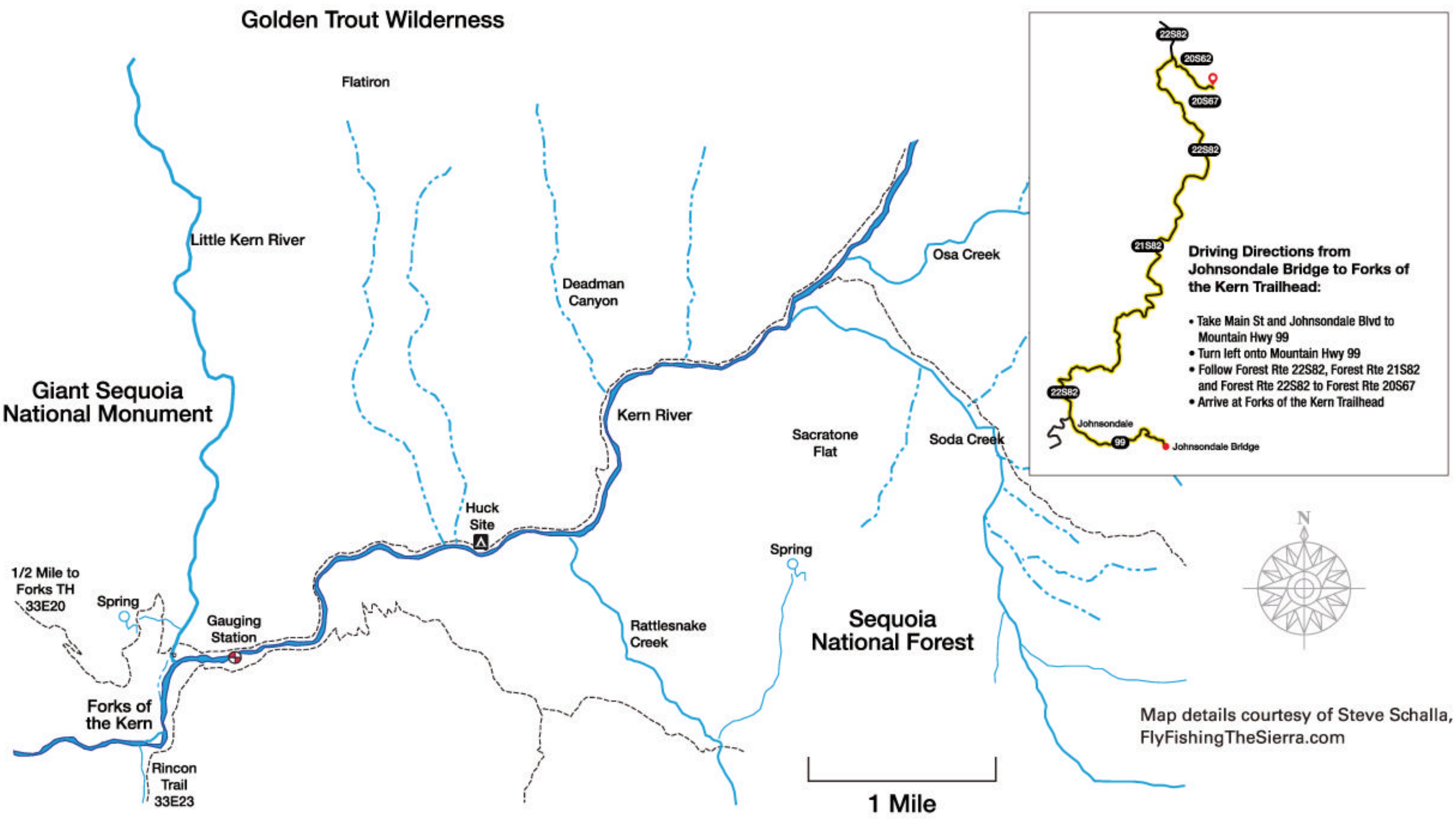
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Flatiron
Little Kern River
Deadman Canyon
Osa Creek
Giant Sequoia National Monument
Kern River
Sacratone Flat
Soda Creek
Huck Site
Spring
1/2 Mile to Forks TH 33E20
Spring
Gauging Station
Rattlesnake Creek
Sequoia National Forest
Forks of the Kern
Rincon Trail 33E23
1 Mile
N
22S82
20S62
20S67
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Johnsondale
99
Johnsondale Bridge

Driving Directions from Johnsondale Bridge to Forks of the Kern Trailhead:

- Take Main St and Johnsondale Blvd to Mountain Hwy 99
- Turn left onto Mountain Hwy 99
- Follow Forest Rte 22S82, Forest Rte 21S82 and Forest Rte 22S82 to Forest Rte 20S67
- Arrive at Forks of the Kern Trailhead

Map details courtesy of Steve Schalla, FlyFishingTheSierra.com

BUGS

The altitude at the confluence is approximately 5,500 feet. Not only is this good news for the lungs, it also means grasshoppers. Lots of them. Multiple species of grasshoppers in a variety of colors flourish here. The KRRs can't resist them. Grasshoppers appear in the early spring and last all the way through November. They get huge, too. How would you like to throw a size two hopper pattern? I tie a Huck hopper that big, just so I can use it on the Kern. Does that sound fun or what?! In that lull of the afternoon, you can fish a hopper-dropper providing all-day action.

The Kern is not known as a "buggy" river with prolific hatches. But that doesn't mean it does not enjoy hatches. It does. Especially during the witching hour as the sun goes down. Springtime brings the big 'ol salmon and skwalla flies and you just hope to get in there in time to enjoy them.

- ***Mayflies*** - BWOs appear in abundance early summer and then again in the fall. Other mayflies like PMDs, March Browns, Little Yellow Mays, and Speckle-wings appear all throughout the fishing season.
- ***Caddis*** - During the heart of the summer season, you'll see many types of caddis, including the Spotted Sedge, Saddle Casemaker, Grannom, and my favorite to imitate, the Green Rock Worm.
- ***Stoneflies*** – Late spring and summer bring a variety of stoneflies, with Goldens and Little Browns dominating the hatches.
- ***Midges*** – According to Steve Schalla, there are over 45 genera of chironomids in California alone. And they are certainly prolific in the Kern.

GEAR

I always bring a 6-weight for the hopper-dropper fishing and a 5-weight for small, dry-fly fishing. Those bigger rods are not to punch through the wind as much as to even up the battles with big wild Kern River rainbows. You can get away with a 3 or 4 weight, but it's just going to take you that much longer to land them, with more risk of losing them. I once watched a Tenkara fisherman get his rod snapped in half. This is

You can catch KRRs on dry flies—and with a good cast and drift, you can hook a lot of them. Photo by Tim Huckaby

not a place for Tenkara. This is not a place for the experienced to throw the bobber either. There is no need.

Mid-day, when the top water action slows down and the fish retreat deep in the runs, I rig a hopper-dropper set up. I typically fish a 3X mono leader for three main reasons. First, KRRs are not leader shy. Second, the takes are vicious— lightning quick. I have a tendency to set too hard because it happens so quickly. I have learned the hard way about leaving my flies in a KRR's face. Third, the Kern is a fly-eater—you just have to plan on losing a lot of flies here. It's overgrown on the banks, and there are a ton of things like deadfall to catch your droppers in the river. I drop nymphs with fluorocarbon tippet.

TACTICS

Double-hopper fishing can be wildly productive for most of the summer and well into fall. I usually run a big hopper, like a size 2 or 4, with a smaller one—say a size 10 or 12—trailed about 12 inches behind. Even the smaller Kern River rainbows will try to get the huge size 4 Huck Hopper in their mouth. They're so aggressive, in fact, they'll often rise just to bite off a leg to drown the hopper. I thought I was just missing hook sets until I realized the legs were disappearing from my Huck Hoppers.

Often, I won't see the midday lull and fish double hoppers all day. Then I'll switch to a size 18—anything small—for the evening "witching hour." This is a place where you can get takes on a hopper as the sun comes up. And at sunset? It barely matters what you throw—they're on it. For me, a midday lull means I haven't had a take on top for 20 minutes or so. When that happens, I switch to my typical hopper-dropper rig: a 7-foot 3X leader with a size 4 Huck Hopper on top, followed by 3-4 feet of 4X flouro tippet and a size 8 black Beldar stonefly nymph (or any stonefly nymph), then another 18 inches of 5X flouro tippet and a size 16 Huck Green Caddis Nymph Cripple.

Now, if you're an experienced fly fisher, you may be saying to yourself: "That's insane." And it kind of is. But when the river warms, the fish head for the deep runs, and that rig gets down to them, while still inducing strikes on top. Overhead casting that rig is difficult. Roll casting is even harder. And those three tungsten beads in the stonefly don't make it any easier. Even without wind, it's barely manageable. That long, three-fly rig is not only difficult to cast, you also risk losing flies. But it's deadly effective all season.

I usually lose flies in three ways:

1. Hung up on the bottom – it's a wild river with tons of structure.
2. Wind - one gust mid-cast and you're hung up in the bushes.
3. Missed casts - When I try to hit a 2-inch window with a 40-foot cast because I *know* there is a big fish in there.

I lose a lot of flies. But I catch a lot of fish. I take the risk because it's worth it. I can rig up again quickly. Yes, it's frustrating. But in my opinion, if you want big rewards, you've got to take risks.

The Upper Kern is best fished standing in the river. Wet wading is the norm in summer, but in spring and fall, you'll need waders. You

Easier Options for Experiencing the Kern

Ok, forget everything I just said about how hard it is to get to the wild section of the Kern. There are two exceptions that make fishing the Upper Kern dramatically easier.

Peppermint Falls Ranch

You can drive to within a short hike of the river while staying in relative luxury at the same time. It's called Peppermint Falls Ranch (PFR). This 5-mile by 5-mile swath of land, which includes two full miles of Peppermint Creek teeming with wild trout and waterfalls, is privately owned. It has been developed with cabins on site and a private paved road that gets within striking distance of the river—a 20-minute hike on a well-groomed trail down to the river. The ranch opened after a huge amount of renovation in the spring of 2025. It is located in the wild section of the Upper Kern River about 10 miles downstream from the confluence of the Kern and the Little Kern Rivers.

There are huge stretches of the wild section of the Kern River I have yet to get to. In November of 2024, the good folks at PFR invited me to the property. While there, I fished the wild section of the Kern in the canyon at the end of the season. A stretch that has rarely been fished … ever. And oh man, did I stick 'em. I fished a stretch of the Kern that I have been trying to get to, and failed, for over 20 years. The short hike to the river meant I didn't have to carry a backpack—and I slept in bed at night! You can even day trip in a helicopter right from PFR to the upper reaches of the Kern to fly fish.

Peppermint Falls Ranch is a wonderful way to experience the Upper Kern River. I encourage you to check it out. And if you do, I'd be happy to guide you!

PeppermintFallsRanch.com | 760-549-9976

Golden Trout Wilderness Packtrains

Another alternative is Golden Trout Wilderness Packtrain. This is the modality for the adventurous fly fisher who still wants to sleep in a tent on the upper reaches of the Kern River, but doesn't want to hike in all the required gear. Or hike at all. You can have a mule train carry all your gear for you. You can choose to hike in or ride a horse. But the beautiful thing is the amount of gear that can be loaded onto the mules. That could mean coolers with steaks, beer, and ice for margaritas. I love these guys so much. Full disclosure, I guide for them too. Let's go!

GoldenTroutPackTrains.com | 559-542-2816

Flashy attractor nymphs will do well in sunny, crystal-clear conditions. Photo by Tim Huckaby

only make the mistake of leaving them behind once. A few years ago, I decided to lighten my backpack by leaving my waders behind and wet-wading in mid-November. The fishing was so good I couldn't pull myself out of the river, but when I finally did, my legs were numb and I could barely walk.

Wading boots are a must because of the slick, polished granite that dominates the riverbed. Even in lower flows, some spots are too fast or deep to wade. Roll casts, side casts, and reach casts are essential to success. There are spots to teach beginners, especially in low flows. But in higher flows, success usually belongs to the experienced.

Can you throw a streamer here? Absolutely. There are numerous deep pools and runs. One time, a KRR hit my streamer so hard it ripped the rod right out of my hands. I literally had to chase it downstream. But honestly, the dry fly fishing is usually so good on the Upper Kern that I very rarely strip a streamer. That said, throwing mouse patterns at night is a hoot of fun here.

Flashy attractor nymphs will do well in sunny, crystal-clear conditions. I tie most of mine in a "cripple" format—with a pronounced holographic wing case and stunted wings. I know it sounds weird: a nymph with a crippled wing case and wings. But, over the years, I have modified these flies to the point where they just work. My theory? Predators prey on the weak and crippled. Perdigon-style flies also do well here because they get down into the Kern's deep, fast runs in a hurry.

Generally, the farther upriver you go, the better the fishing. The first two miles above the confluence gets the most pressure, but even that's not much. And don't overlook the stretch downstream of the confluence. It rarely gets fished, partly because there's no trail. It's a bushwhack that requires some river crossings, but the rewards can be just as good.

RIVER FLOW

I'll go to my grave arguing that the single most important factor in successfully fly fishing the Upper Kern River is flow. Not the moon, not the barometer, not even the season—just flow. The Upper Kern fishes best at low flow. I typically don't fish it until the river drops below 500 cfs, which usually means waiting until the end of July.

At 250 cfs, there are plenty of places where you can safely wade. Below 150 cfs—what you'd see in a drought year—there are multiple places to cross and not a lot of places for KRRs to hide from a good cast and drift.

You can monitor flows on the Upper Kern on the Dreamflows site.

Looking at the 5-year annual view, you can see that the river typically doesn't drop to fishable levels until late July. Hot Tip: The Kern is a tough river to cross, which means the far side, without a trail, rarely gets fished. If you can cross safely and are comfortable casting from the "left-handed side" of the river, you will be able to hit holding water that's impossible to reach from river right. These are spots that rarely get fished.

Fly fishing the upper Kern River is not for the faint of heart, but the rewards are more than worth the effort.

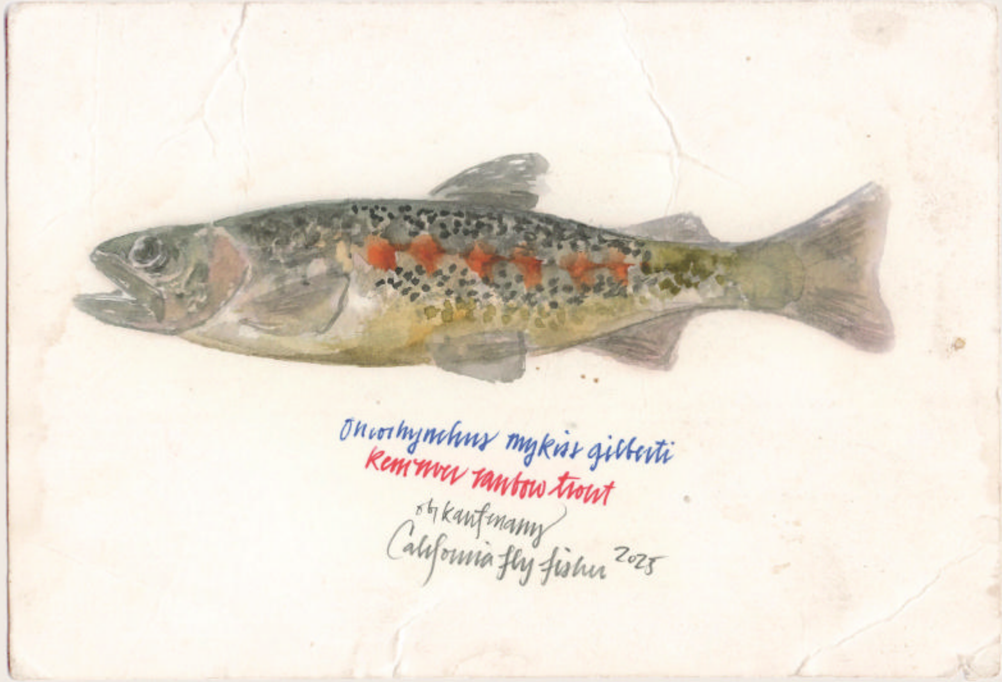
The journey may leave you breathless with your heart pumping, but the experience will be unforgettable. This area of the Golden Trout Wilderness is stunning, the solitude is unmatched, and the river sees little fishing pressure. The three subspecies of golden trout are as unique as the setting itself. I truly hope you get the chance to feel the same joy and connection to this place that I've been lucky enough to experience over many years.

FIELD NOTES

GEOLOGY: KERN RIVER

By Jeff Ludlow
Illustrations by Obi Kaufmann

There's the South San Joaquin
Where the seeds of the dust bowl are found
And there's a place called Mount Whitney
From where the mighty Kern River comes down
Well, it's not deep or wide
But it's a mean piece of water, my friend
And I may cross on the highway
But I'll never swim the Kern River again



The lyrics of the great Merle Haggard strum a haunting note for the Kern River as one of California's most treacherous rivers. With its headwaters high on the flanks of Mount Whitney and its terminus in the bottom of the San Joaquin, the argument could be made that the Kern has one of the steepest river gradients in North America. What results is a freestone upper river canyon fed by snowmelt from the highest peaks of the Sierra Nevada. True to the words of the country crooner, the river was named by John Fremont in honor of Edward Kern, Fremont's topographer, who nearly drowned in the turbulent waters of the river in 1845, while mapping its course.

The Kern River flows from north to south, unique among the rivers on the west slope of the Sierra Nevada. This anomalous flow direction is entirely controlled by the Kern Canyon Fault (KCF), a strike-slip fault where rocks on the east side of the fault were displaced laterally south, relative to the rocks on the west side of the fault. Geologic studies suggest that the KCF once reached as far south as the Tehachapi Mountains, where the KCF joined the Garlock Fault, another major strike-slip fault that in turn is connected to the San Andreas Fault. Together, movement along these major fault systems gave rise to the western tail of the Southern Sierra Nevada range seen today.

Three very important endemic trout species are found in the Kern River watershed: the California golden trout, the Little Kern River golden trout and Kern River rainbow trout. These fish all share a common ancestor, the coastal rainbow trout, which gained access to the Kern River watershed during the Ice Age, when glacial run-off flooded barriers, allowing fish to migrate into the high Sierra. Over the millennia, as the glacial runoff receded and exposed fish migration barriers, the coastal rainbow trout were isolated in the Kern River system, and the processes of insular or island biogeography took hold. Species-ecosystem relationships developed, and isolated natural communities were created for the Kern River to allow its endemic species to evolve separately, without influence from the coastal rainbow trout. Not unlike the concepts of Darwin's finches, the evolutionary biology of the Kern River trout species is greatly influenced by geographic and geologic variables.

For our state fish, the California golden trout, the forces of geology created the ideal habitat for this fish to evolve. Golden Trout Creek was once a tributary of the South Fork of the Kern River. However, approximately 176,000 years ago, basalt flows from three volcanic cones changed the course of Golden Trout Creek forever. The creek that once flowed south and east to the South Fork of the Kern was rerouted west by the lava flows towards and over the canyon walls of the North Fork Kern River. This created Volcano Falls, a barrier to fish migration from the North Fork. As a result, a new ecosystem was created isolated from the North and South forks of the Kern River, and its trout, providing a habitat for the California golden trout to evolve into the beloved species known today.

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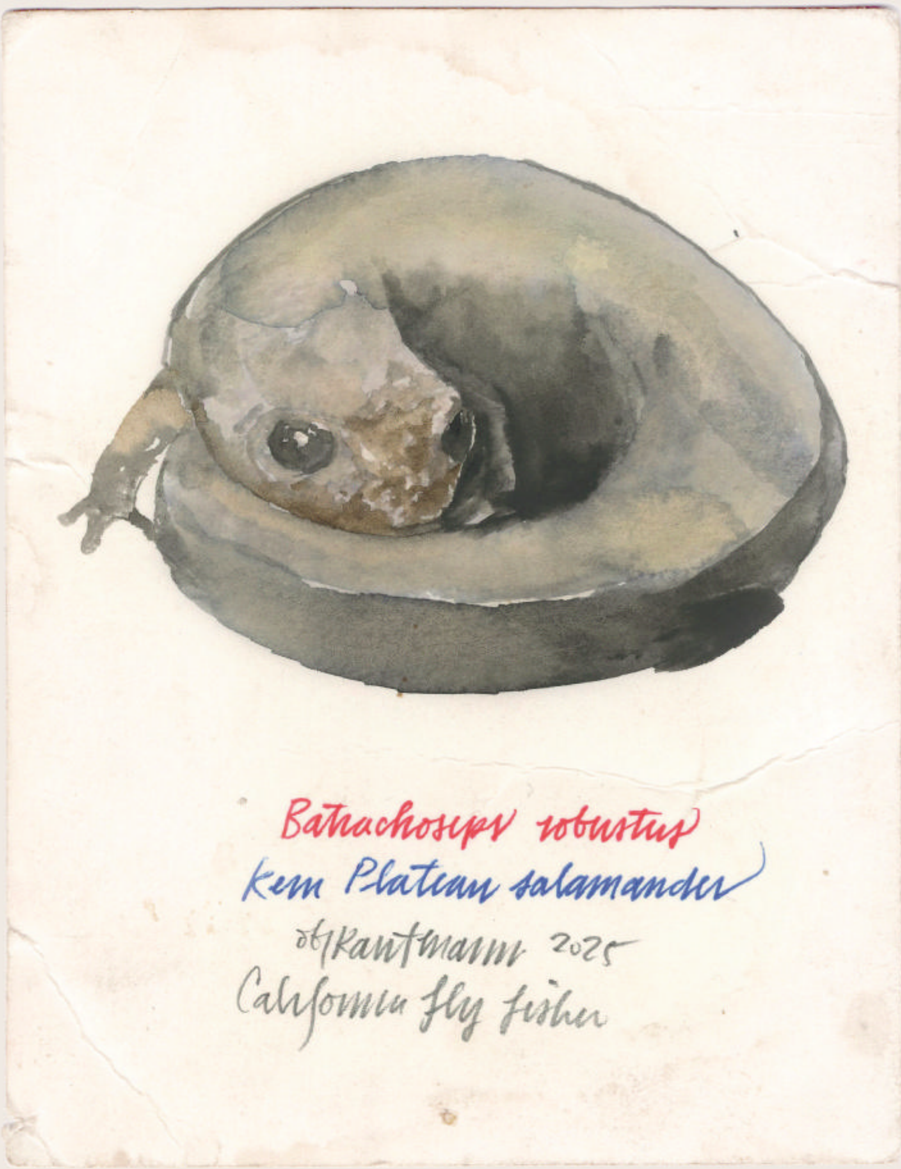
THE SALAMANDER THAT BREATHES THROUGH ITS SKIN

By Sabra Purdy
Aquatic Ecologist



Yes, you read that right—breathes through its skin. The Kern Plateau salamander (*Batrachoseps robustus*) doesn't have lungs, but it doesn't let that stop it. Instead, this slim little relic of deep time inhales life straight through its moist, mottled hide. And it does so in one of the most rugged, least forgiving corners of California: the Kern Plateau.

The Kern Plateau is a place of intensely unique hydrogeology. The uplands tend to support conifer forest with sparse to barren understories—inhospitable terrain for moisture-loving creatures like salamanders. But the meadows and stream-fed valley bottoms teem with biodiversity. Springs often appear along the meadow margins, where groundwater pours from the earth. These seeps make up only a sliver of the landscape, but they're everything. Life here depends on them.

Found nowhere else on Earth, *B. robustus* is a true Kern River original. It lives a hidden life under logs and duff, clinging to cool, damp microhabitats between 4,700 and 9,200 feet. Most hikers and anglers pass by unaware—but it's been here for millennia, quietly surviving in the margins.

What makes it even more remarkable is its toughness. Wildfires, grazing, timber harvests, OHV traffic, and climate shifts have all taken a swing at its habitat. But this salamander hangs on. Still, a hot dry season—or a badly placed road—could wipe out an entire population.

The salamander belongs to a rare group of "lungless salamanders" that absorb oxygen directly through their skin—a trait tying them to the health of their habitat. They're also direct-developers, hatching as tiny versions of adults and skipping the tadpole stage entirely. This evolutionary shortcut lets them thrive without standing water, relying on cool, shaded seep zones dotting the Plateau.

Researchers have only recently begun to understand how genetically distinct *B. robustus* is. It's not just rare—it's ancient. Isolated by millennia of tectonics, climate shifts, and glacial retreat, it carries a genetic signature found nowhere else. A biological time capsule, quietly writing a chapter of the Kern's natural history.

For fly fishers exploring the forks of the Kern, this salamander reminds us wildness doesn't always make a splash. It lives quiet and low to the ground—but it matters. Its survival tells a story of the resilience of California's high country and the fragility of the microhabitats that sustain it.

So next time you're fishing the forks of the Kern or wandering the backcountry near a seep or spring, remember—just inches below your boots, there might be a salamander breathing through its skin, holding the line for a species millions of years in the making. Just like the trout we love, it's a part of what makes this place wild.

Illustrator Obi Kaufmann is an award-winning author of many best-selling books on California's ecology, biodiversity, and geography. His 2017 book *The California Field Atlas*, currently in its seventh printing, recontextualized popular ideas about California's more-than-human world. The last in that series, *The State of Fire; Why California Burns* was released in September 2024.

GUIDE PROFILE

Tim Huckaby

Guide for Peppermint Falls Ranch and Golden Trout Wilderness Pack Outfitters
Years Guiding and Teaching Fly Fishing: 25+

Meet Tim Huckaby, a true software industry luminary whose career reads like a tech adventure novel. Tim has over 35 years as an AI pioneer, Microsoft insider, and keynote speaker with more than a few curtain calls alongside Gates and Ballmer. But when he's not lighting up the stage or engineering the next tech breakthrough, Tim's wading into wild rivers with a fly rod in hand. A passionate and deeply experienced fly angler, he's chased fish across the Rockies, the Sierra, and his own backyard waters.

How did you decide to become a guide? Well, I had been teaching guiding for years for free and loved it. I started out teaching camp counselors for free how to fly fish, so they could, in turn, teach kids how to fly fish in the upcoming summer. I was doing this without a permit but worked with the Forest Service to obtain a permit to guide in the Golden Trout Wilderness area. Once word got out that I had a permit, people began hiring me.

How do you balance guiding with family and personal life? With two adult kids, one in Bozeman and one in Denver, visiting them is not a sacrifice. After 36 years of marriage to my college sweetheart, I can tell you that she enjoys stretches where I'm not in her way at home.

How do you handle difficult clients? By setting expectations. I have everyone I guide complete a questionnaire that outlines what they want to learn and how they want to approach it. Then we discuss it. I have never encountered a difficult client. I strongly believe this is due to all the communication that establishes expectations before we ever step into the river.

Are there specific conservation concerns in your area that you wish to draw attention to? Conservation starts with awareness. I want people to know about how awesome the Golden Trout Wilderness is. I want more people to visit it and fish there. Especially young people. And I want the Forest Service to have a legitimate budget to facilitate access and monitor the wilderness.

Is mojo a thing? It's not mojo; It's karma. I strongly believe in the karma factor of fly fishing. "If you feel it, do it." If you have good karma, your fishing success will show.

What changes, for better or worse, have you noticed since you started guiding? It concerns me that the demographic of fly fishing is still dominated by older white guys like me—that we don't have more young people involved in fly fishing. It worries me that the generation below mine doesn't even let their kids go to a park, let alone venture into the wilderness, where real life lessons are taught. It also bothers me that hot spotting is now viewed as a bad thing. It seems acceptable to be selfish by keeping your fishing spots a secret. I want to proactively share the places I love to fish and will help anyone who asks. I'm the guy who gives up his hole to a total beginner and shares flies that are working with so they can enjoy success.

What is your most memorable catch and why? I only remember the fish I screw up and lose. There's the 3-foot blue trevally on Mahaulepu Beach in Kauai. The giant roosterfish in Baja that got away because of my poorly tied knot. I could go on and on. Last week, it was the 24-inch cutthroat in Wyoming that shook me by leaping 10 feet in the air because I tightened the line on him.

Describe your ideal client? Fun, excited, willing to learn. Willing to take in the entire wilderness experience, not just the fishing. And willing to laugh ... a lot. Because I'm a storyteller.

What's the #1 thing you wish every client knew or would do? Set quickly when I scream, "Go!"

One piece of gear/equipment you can't live without? The ½ liter Katadyn BeFree water filtration flask. It lets you drink cold Upper Kern River water whenever you want, without the need for pumping or hassle.

8 QUESTIONS WITH TIM

1. **Your favorite fly:** Huck Hopper. Without a doubt. In any color imaginable.
2. **Your go-to river snack:** Homemade beef jerky. I make all my own dehydrated backpacking food for myself and my clients.
3. **Favorite band/song for fishing**: "I'm Gonna Miss Her" by Brad Paisley.
4. **Favorite meal under $15:** The Jack Daniels Cloudy: JD, soda water, and a splash of Coke.
5. **Favorite après fishing beverage:** The Kern River Cocktail—my own concoction. It's a couple fingers of JD in your backpacking coffee cup with a couple fingers of filtered Kern River Water.
6. **Favorite gear under $100?** Nite Ize Hitch Plus MicroLock - Phone Case Anchor for Drop Protection. I'm a phone dropper. I have two iPhones at the bottom of Lake Crowley, one in the Madison River in Montana, one in the Kern, and one in the ocean. This $12 item attaches a loop to your phone that you can connect to a lanyard.
7. **Stupidest question a client has asked:** "I'm so sorry. I hooked you in the nose. Does it hurt?"
8. **If you were a fish, what kind would you be?** Oh man… there's no fish even close to the top of the food chain. I guess a steelhead. Because after an 800+ mile journey from entering the Columbia River system in Oregon, I wouldn't have to die after getting frisky in Idaho.

TIPS & TECHNIQUES

The Euro Nymphing Evolution

By EJ Melzer

We have heard about them over the last two decades: Polish nymphing, Czech nymphing, French nymphing, Spanish nymphing, tight line nymphing, and now Euro nymphing. Based on questions at my Euro clinics and presentations, all the naming is often more confusing than helpful. To help simplify things, I will try to clarify how these different techniques have evolved into what we now generally call Euro nymphing.

When I arrived in California 20+ years ago from Europe, my fly-fishing experience was limited to casting homemade streamers for northern pike on small canals surrounded by dairy cows. I had never heard about nymphing of any kind. The dominant nymphing style in the U.S. was and probably still is the indicator and split shot setup, and this became my go-to nymphing technique for the first few years. This can be a deadly technique, but it is far from perfect.

During a fly-fishing classroom clinic taught by Californian legend Ralph Cutter he showed us underwater footage of multiple trout quickly taking and spitting out a fly in the same run without the indicator showing any signs of a bite. That was an eye-opener and the catalyst for me to start exploring, testing, and trying new techniques. Years of trial and error, building rods, tying flies, and trying different leaders and sighters followed.

It's true that many locally known and unknown anglers experimented with different nymphing techniques years before we started Euro nymphing. Well-known here in California is the Ted Fay style, which he learned from Ted Towendolly (or Tauhindauli, see also Eric Palmer's article in *California Fly Fisher*, April 2015). Stop by the fly shop in Dunsmuir, and you'll still find weighted 'Black Bomber' flies in the fly bins. You should try your luck out on the Upper Sac at the nearby Tauhindauli park.

COMPETITIVE FLY FISHING

To understand why we now have Euro nymphing, we must look at the competitive fly-fishing world. The Fédération Internationale de Peche Sportive Mouche (FIPS-Mouche) is the international organization (Fips-Mouche.com) that annually organizes the World Fly Fishing Championships. Although competitive fishing appeals only to a small number of the best fly fishermen, this competitive environment is where most of today's improvements and developments come from including needle point barbless hooks, longer rods, and tippet rings, to specialized sighter materials, paint markers, and mainstream items like tungsten beads. The evolution to what we now call Euro nymphing also started in this competitive world.

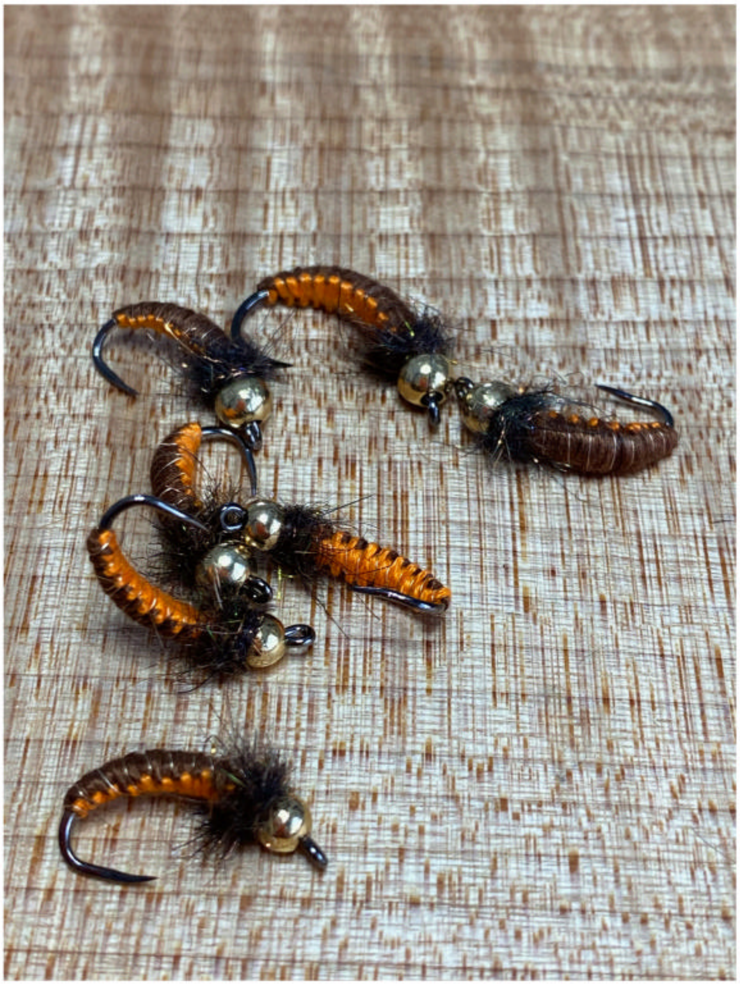
When Euro nymphing, keep a tight line and guide your flies through the water.
Photo courtesy EJ Melzer

THE START: POLISH NYMPHING

In 1989, the world championships were held in Kuusamo, Finland. It was the year the Berlin Wall came down and Eastern Europe began opening up. During that competition, a son of a Polish farmer competed for the Polish national team and fished an unconventional style that he had learned from his father, and that style would change the fly-fishing competitions forever.

He was using a regular fly rod with a regular fly line. There would only be two to three feet of fly line out of his rod tip. Attached to that was a leader that was about two-thirds of the length of his rod. At the end of this setup, he would tie one or two (with dropper tag) heavily weighted flies. With a flick of the wrist, those flies would be 'lobbed' upstream. After the flies hit the water, they would sink fast to the bottom, and from that moment, he would lead or pull them slightly faster than the current through the drift with a stretched arm and a horizontal rod position.

As he had a direct connection with his flies, he would be in contact with them throughout the entire drift and would feel every bite. This fly fisherman was Vladi Trzebenia. He became the individual world champion that year by a landslide, and the Polish team also became world champions. This 'new' style he used was called 'Polish Nymphing' after that. Years later, after his competitive career, Vladi became a coach for the U.S.A. fly fishing team and helped promote his successful style here. Flies he developed and used like the 'Polish Woven nymph' and the 'Vladi worm' (aka condom worm) are still successful today.



Polish Woven nymphs tied by the author. Photo by EJ Melzer

CZECH NYMPHING

While some countries and anglers attributed their success (or lack thereof) to the new and unknown flies, it was the Czech team that embraced this new style of fishing early on and further developed and marketed it in the years following the Polish success. The Czechs made modifications and created many new Czech nymph-style patterns, incorporating bright-colored sections at the end of the fly line for improved visibility. They won several world championships in the years after the Polish won, and renamed the style as 'Czech Nymphing.'

The Czech and Polish nymphing techniques are very similar. Both are short-line tactics that use traditional fly lines with a short leader. The arm and rod are stretched horizontally or slightly raised (no high sticking) to reach further, and the drifts are very short. As you fish only a rod and arm's length away, they work best in situations where you can get close to the fish without spooking them. This means most of the time, fast-moving water that is not too deep (up to three feet) and that allows the heavy flies to reach the bottom before the drift is over. While originally developed for grayling, it works as well on any trout stream with these conditions.

The shortcomings of the short line techniques become very clear when the conditions do not allow you to get close to the fish. To fish further away and be in contact with your flies, you must lift your rod tip and get more line out. The weight of the fly line now starts working against you. If you lift your rod too high, the weight of the line can pull your flies out of the water as your line falls back to you through the eyelets of your rod. If you have enough line out to prevent this, the weight of the fly line creates a big arc that drags your flies unnaturally through the water.

FRENCH NYMPHING

On clear, slow, or shallow rivers in the Pyrenees and other areas, the short line approach is at a disadvantage because you spook the fish. It was the French national team that introduced a completely new nymphing technique on those rivers, which became highly successful and formed the basis for most modern nymphing styles.

Instead of using a regular fly line and leader, they began using very long, tapered leaders, 20 feet or longer. The fly line would stay on the reel. At the end of this long leader, they would knot a bright colored section of mono or coiled mono as a sighter before the tippet section. The heavy Polish and Czech nymphs were replaced with nymphs that would be smaller and lighter. These nymphs, often called Frenchies, incorporated fluorescent hotspots and beads to entice the fish. Positioned directly downstream from the fish, you cast this tapered leader delicately upstream. The rod tip is held high, and during the downstream drift, you retrieve the slack and either hold the sighter above the surface or float the sighter section on the surface to detect any bites. In a span of nine years, the French national team became a six-time world champion, twice second, and once third. This long, tapered-leader style was subsequently labeled 'French Nymphing.'

SPANISH NYMPHING

On the other side of the Pyrenees, the Spanish also had a lot of experience with skittish trout. Small, fast-sinking Perdigon-style flies are their favorites in those situations. They modified the French rigs and eliminated the taper. They used thin, long leaders that were made from straight monofilament. Thinner is better as it has less sag, resulting in better drifts and better strike detection. The biggest downside is the lack of taper makes it harder to cast. It's the weight of the flies that you are casting. Belgium casts, combined with lighter rods and softer tips, make casting the light flies on straight leaders possible. And yes, they became world champions, and the straight long mono leader style was named 'Spanish Nymphing.'

EURO NYMPHING

What the short line styles of the Polish and Czechs and the long leader styles of the French and Spanish all have in common is that they put you in direct contact with the fly, and they were all developed by European anglers in competition fly fishing. Contact nymphing or tight line nymphing are sometimes used as synonyms, but it is the Euro name that seems to sound and stick the best. While any one of the styles can

Euro nymphing allows for accessing challenging conditions such as under overhanging trees. Photo courtesy EJ Melzer

be called Euro nymphing, the current Euro developments in rods, flies, and rigging are all based on the long leader techniques.

TRY IT

It is easy to add the Euro approach to your current set of skills, and you can probably start doing this with the gear you already own. Whether you are a 'tug is the drug' swinger, a dry fly fanatic, or a classic indicator fisherman, it's fun to try and learn a new skill on days when those techniques don't work for you.

Specialized Euro rods, lines, and reels are fantastic and definitely worth the investment when you are mastering your skills, but not necessary to get started. As you don't use fly line and the reel is not more than a storage device, any reel and any fly line will work. Longer rods are an advantage, but any rod nine feet or longer that is a 6-weight or lighter is a good starting point. What's left is the leader.

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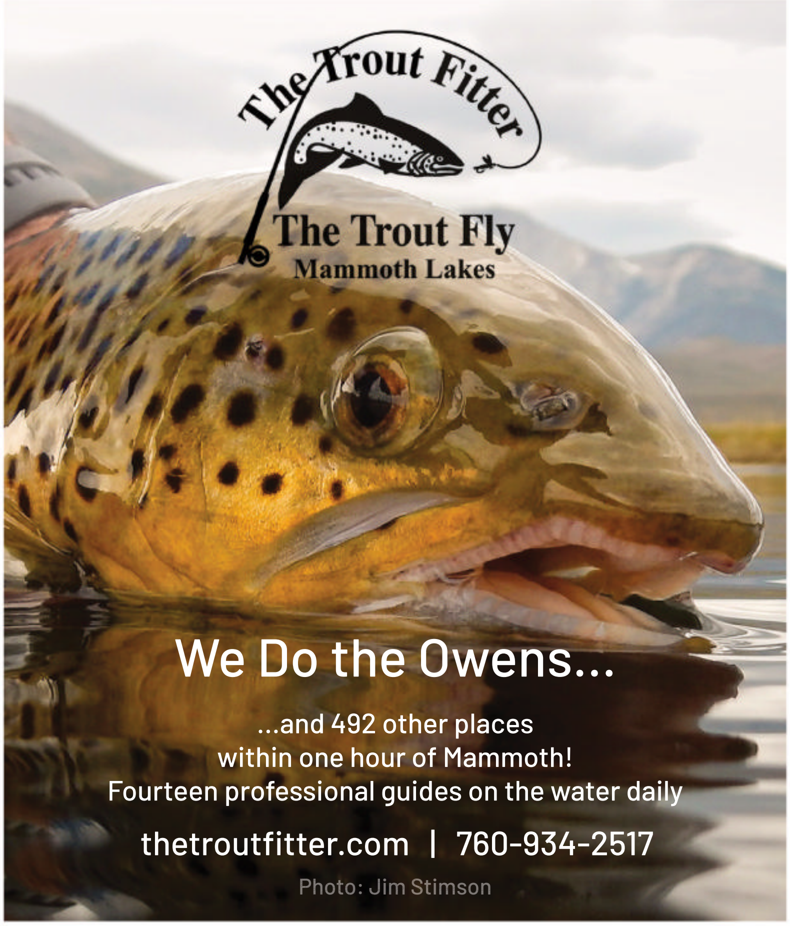

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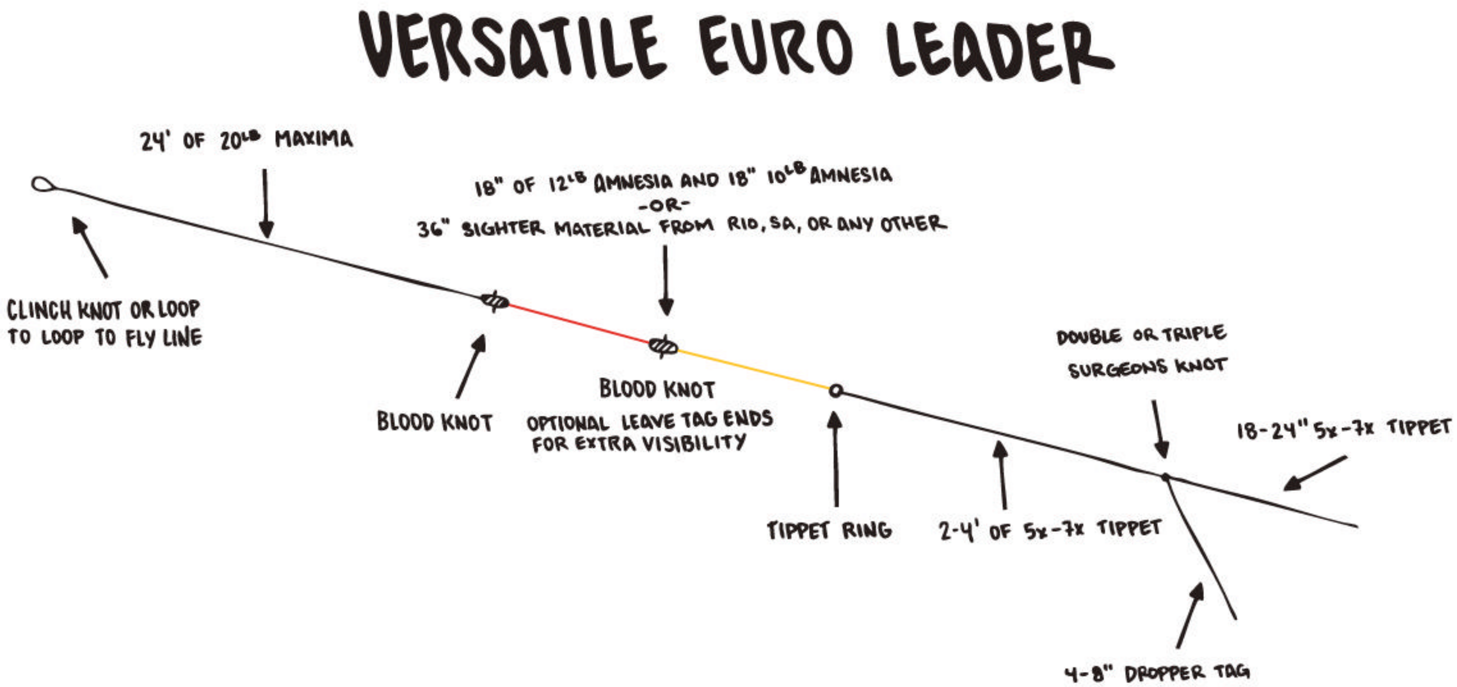

VERSATILE EURO LEADER
24' OF 20LB MAXIMA
18" OF 12LB AMNESIA AND 18" 10LB AMNESIA
-OR-
36" SIGHTER MATERIAL FROM RIO, SA, OR ANY OTHER
CLINCH KNOT OR LOOP TO LOOP TO FLY LINE
BLOOD KNOT
BLOOD KNOT
OPTIONAL LEAVE TAG ENDS FOR EXTRA VISIBILITY
DOUBLE OR TRIPLE SURGEONS KNOT
18-24" 5x-7x TIPPET
TIPPET RING
2-4' OF 5x-7x TIPPET
4-8" DROPPER TAG

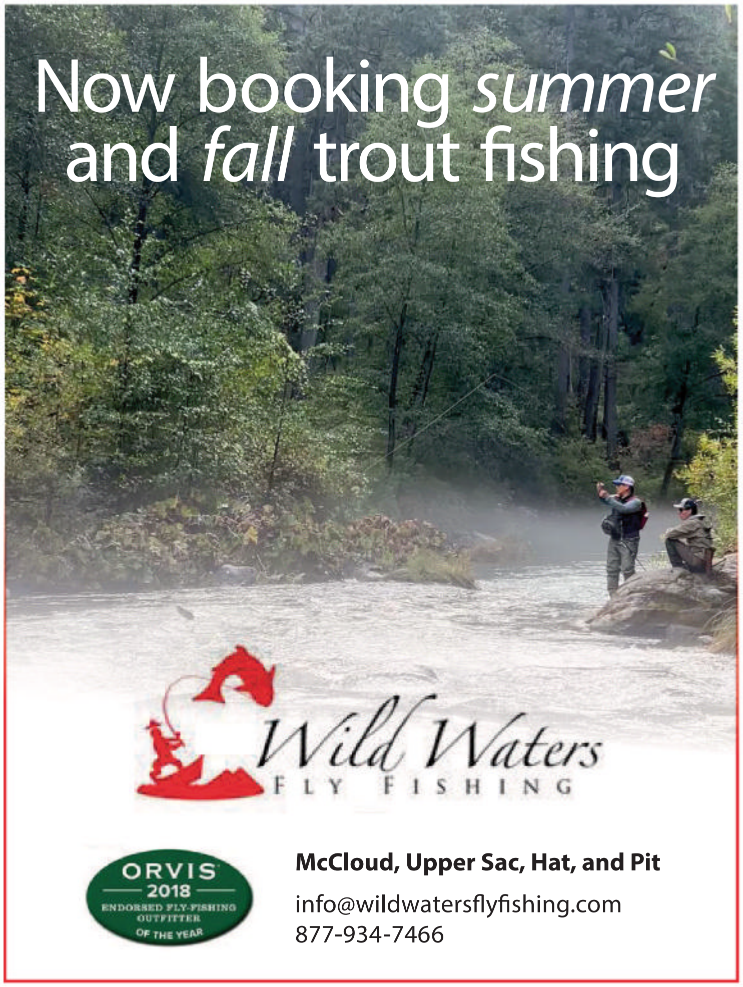
Illustration by Ben Engle

Three key elements of a Euro leader

1. Long: All the line out of the rod tip and in your guides is straight monofilament
2. Sighter: Highly visible piece of line to detect strikes and manage the depth of your rig
3. No taper: Straight leader and straight tippet to your flies

There are many leader formulas around, and this is just one of them, but one that can be easily made with two materials from your fly shop for less than $20. This is a versatile Euro leader recipe and a great starting point. It can be used to cast tiny nymphs up-and-across as well as the more classic, heavier nymphs on the short line style. It is significantly lighter than your regular fly line, yet you can still cast it like a fly line and become accustomed to casting lighter leaders. Just make sure to stretch the whole leader well before you start.

Pick up a spool of Maxima Chameleon or substitute and a spool of sighter tippet or Amnesia, and you are good to go. Once you become comfortable casting this leader, you can go thinner; the pros and cons of that will be explored in another article. Make one, put one in your vest or bag, and try it out the next time. Keep a tight line and guide your flies with the sighter out of the water at a 20-to-45-degree angle. Enjoy fishing waters you otherwise pass by and be surprised by the fish you catch.



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THE GOOD FIGHT

Bugs & Climate Change

By Chris Wright

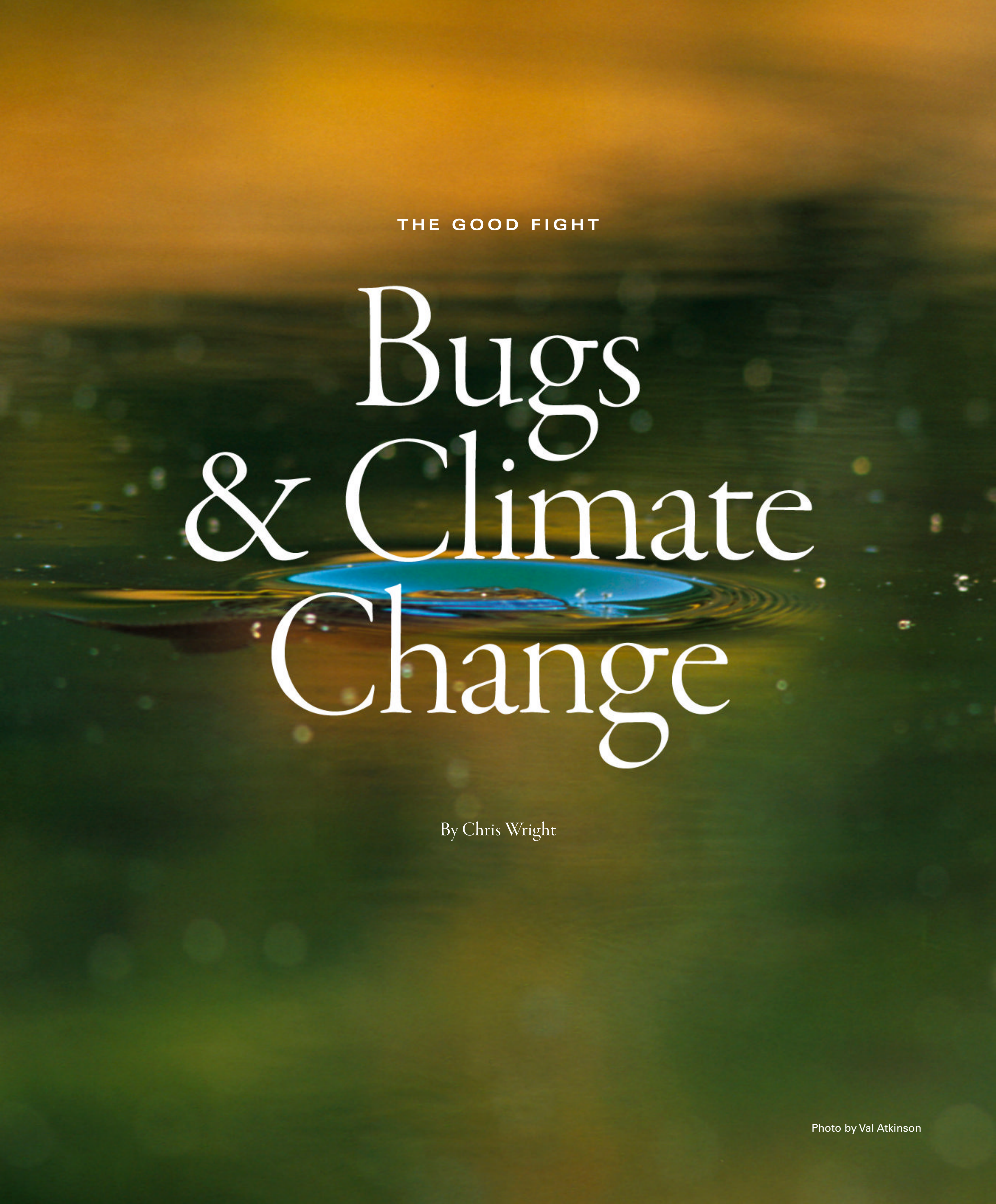
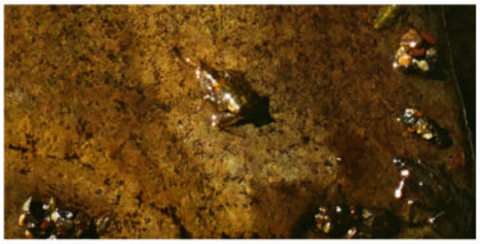


Photo by Val Atkinson

Stoneflies are particularly at risk due to changing climates. One study in Brazil found stonefly ranges poised to shrink in coming decades.

Golden stoneflies are an important insect in many California rivers. Research shows many species become highly specialized to relatively narrow elevation ranges.



Mayflies, stoneflies, and caddisflies, as ectotherms, are likely to be affected by California's warming water temperatures.

I have wondered how climate change is affecting the food our trout eat.

Fly fishing is as much about bugs as it is about fish. The reason for this is obvious: Trout survive and thrive by eating riverine insects—along with everything else they gulp, like minnows, worms, and the odd bit of jerky we anglers drop in. It's bugs they love, and so do we.

These bugs and their metamorphoses are wonders all their own, requiring clean, cold water to live and reproduce. Unfortunately for us, and for fish, mayflies, stoneflies, and caddisflies are highly sensitive to ecosystem change. International studies estimate that the entirety of insect diversity is decreasing by about 1.5%-2% annually. Which is scary to think about, particularly when you are a lover of river insects.

As the planet warms and threats of pollution and other damage loom, these aquatic insects may be a wet, buggy canary in the coal mine.

In my recent reporting on drought and trout, along with climate change, for this magazine ("Drought and Trout," August 2023 issue), I investigated how drought and low river flows, as well as higher water temperatures caused by our warming, changing California, are affecting trout. Man-made climate change is affecting the weather (higher average temperatures, condensed rainfall), and while we have enjoyed a short stretch of "wetter" years, the length of a recent stretch of abnormally dry years between 2012 and 2022 is not negotiable, particularly if your living room is the shallow wet spot behind a shady rock. California Trout's *State of the Salmonids II* report's hair-raising estimate (45 percent of California's salmonids will be extinct by 2050 if present trends continue) does not shock those of us who have watched the annual bumps and bruises (and occasional knockout punches) our rivers are facing.

Bugs are still rich in many of our rivers. But changes are afoot. "As quickly as streams are changing in terms of water temps, can invertebrates adapt to that?" Robert Lusardi, an Assistant Professor of Freshwater Ecology at UC Davis, asked recently. "I don't think we know. My guess is some invertebrates will not be able to adapt—will be extirpated in streams heavily influenced by climate change. Others will be replaced by more tolerant invertebrates capable of thriving in changed environments."

MAYFLIES, STONEFLIES, AND TRICHOPTERA AT RISK

The bugs fly anglers tie on are at risk, worldwide. River insects, such as trout, are ectothermic; their surroundings regulate their body temperature. Warmer water is hard on many species. A recent study by researchers from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil is useful for anglers and entomologists worldwide. Researchers found that among aquatic insect taxa, Ephemeroptera (mayflies), Plecoptera (stoneflies), and Trichoptera (caddisflies) are "well-known bioindicators of environmental changes." Indeed, in one "hot spot" in Brazil's Atlantic Forest, researchers found all three taxa to be "at high risk from future climate change," with stoneflies (that antediluvian-looking insect we California anglers love to imitate) of most concern.

How could climate change affect bugs in California? Entomologists studying climate change expect freshwater species distribution, density, and diversity to be impacted in the coming decades. Some projections indicate that climate change will force freshwater insect species to shift their distribution to higher altitudes upstream, where they can remain in favorable climates. Unfortunately, research also shows species adapted to cooler climates in high-elevation headwaters are more at risk from warming water and air temperatures. "These high-altitude cold-adapted species risk being replaced by a more cosmopolitan, generalist, or warm-tolerant species, yielding a shift in the prevailing community composition," as one paper put it. Buggy gentrification!

"I expect that coldwater invertebrates in the Sierras could similarly be replaced by those at lower elevations," Kyle Leathers, an entomologist and researcher with the USGS told me. Recent work by Dr. Richard Bottorff of UC Davis studying stonefly populations in the Cosumnes River found that species were highly specialized to certain elevation ranges. "Invertebrates specializing in high elevations may have to move to higher elevations, or they could run out of habitat with the conditions they need," Leathers said.

Not only elevation, but also water temperature, affects habitat. Lusardi and other researchers have studied how rivers in California, fed by cold springs such as Fall River and others, might prove more resilient to warming air temperatures, providing a refuge for freshwater insect life and trout. Their research indicates that spring systems typically have a higher density of insects and other things trout eat. (Runoff streams are naturally poor food systems in comparison.) Even if an increase in water temperatures causes a loss of thermal habitat, this extra food density may help trout and invertebrates survive. However, even in these systems, rising air temperatures are impacting life.

WARMING WATERS, BUG BOOM AND BUST TIMES

There are few studies on climate change stressors and California's aquatic insect populations. But studies of mountain regions globally and within

Hexagenia mayflies are massive — and are an important bio-indicator of ecosystem health. Photo by Val Atkinson

the Sierra Nevada show that climate change is reducing snowpack, advancing snowmelt, and altering river ecosystems. Scientists expect this "early snowmelt destabilization" caused by earlier, warmer springs will alter insect production and emergence patterns via shifts in community composition and "phenology"—the timing of an organism's development. Bug populations will change, as will the timing of their life cycles.

A 2024 study in the Eastern Sierra examined how earlier snowmelt could alter the phenology of mountain stream organisms and ecosystem processes (like, say, trout-eating). Researchers from UC Berkeley studied invertebrate species' responses across a series of replicated stream channels. In some stream channels, water flow matched current conditions; in others, low-flow treatments simulated potential climate change conditions at the end of this century, when snowmelt is predicted to start earlier in the year, resulting in low discharge during the dry season.

Researchers found that low-flow conditions drove changes in water temperature, including an 8° F to 13.5° F increase in maximum water temperature under "summer" conditions. The channels remained oxygenated throughout the experiment, though dissolved oxygen did decline seasonally. Importantly, the low-flow regimes affected the production and respiration rates of epilithic biofilm, the base production of our stream food web, including the food that insects eat to survive.

Overall, aquatic invertebrates responded in a myriad of ways to changes in flow and water temperatures. Some species benefited, and others were harmed. They exhibited fine-scale responses to low-flow timing, in particular, by causing some species to boom and others to decline in abundance. (Big winners? Some specific chironomids and caddisflies that do well in warmer waters; big losers? Drunella flavilnea (a mayfly) and Micrasema (a caddisfly) both experienced declines in abundance associated with early low flow.) Interestingly, the total productivity of the system remained fairly consistent across flow treatments, which is good news for fish, birds, and other animals that eat them. However, Leathers noted that more effects might have been observed if his team had studied the streams for another year; low-flow conditions could affect the reproduction and early survival of new generations of bugs

A MISMATCH ISSUE

Researchers also saw that the majority of invertebrate species experience changes in phenology—the timing of their life cycles. In general, warmer temperatures speed up invertebrate life cycles, resulting in bugs that are migrating as nymphs, hatching as duns, and mating as spinners earlier in the year.

As trout anglers know, the timing of food is extremely important to the webs of life abiding within streams and rivers. Scientists predict some species will benefit from climate change, and others will be harmed, but the condition of each river's buggy biome is unique. The study, for instance, considered the timing of chironomid midges and the behavior of Brewer's Blackbirds that eat them. In the low-flow test streams, production of the midges increased in the middle of the Blackbird nesting period; lucky blackbirds. Other species that rely on stream invertebrates might not be so lucky if there is a mismatch between invertebrate emergence and "consumer phenology" like nesting.

Even phenological shifts of individual species can impact ecosystems on a large scale, often with less favorable results. Picture milder winters helping the mountain pine beetle population, causing massive stands of dead pines that are ripe for wildfire. Or golden stoneflies migrating to the banks sooner, before trout are ready to gorge.

"There's something to be said for the emergence of fish and high-food resources at the same time," Lusardi says. "If we have earlier runoff in river systems, these fish could hatch at similar times but may not have the food resources (e.g., species and abundance) that they historically have had, when they've had them. There might be a mismatch."

MANY BUGS, MANY IMPACTS

The picture painted by current aquatic bug science is a mixed one in which some species boom in warmer times, and predators like trout adapt (or can't) to different insect emergence times and hatches throughout the year.

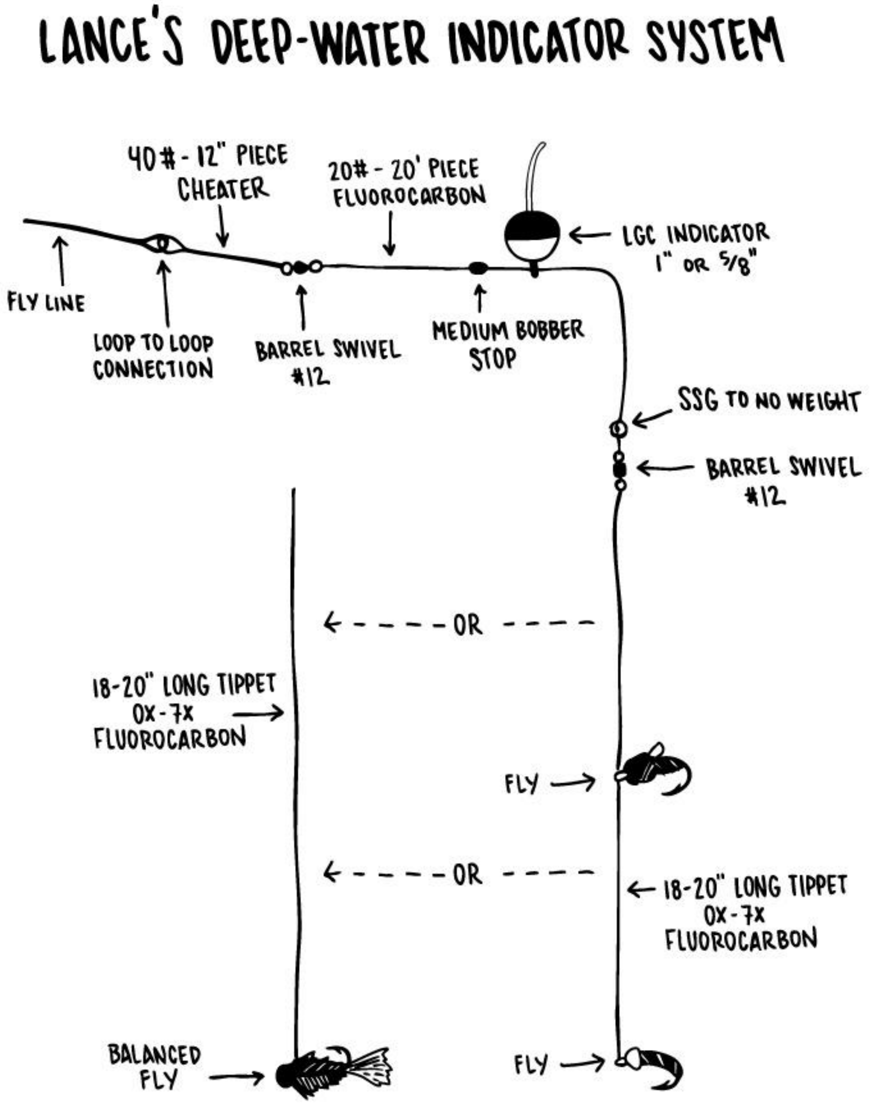
In the final chapter of his PhD dissertation, Leathers studied how different aspects of drought affected aquatic insects in Bull Creek, in the Sierra Nevada. Here and across California, reduced snowpack from our warming climate, plus other man-made changes like de-vegetation or groundwater pumping, could lead to increased water temperature, reduced water velocity, and increased fine sediment on the stream bottom. Leathers found that sixteen of the nineteen most common aquatic macroinvertebrates in the creek had a significant relationship to those stream condition changes. "There were positive and negative responses to each variable," he wrote me over email, "so there will probably be a mixture of species that are harmed or helped by drought conditions."

Our impact on nature is hard to read — like when hunting for bugs on streambed rocks, you really only know the truth of the stones you turn over. Based on the current scientific evidence, I believe that insect hatches and trout behavior are likely to continue changing in California. Don't be surprised if you find yourself reaching for a size 22 midge more frequently in the Eastern Sierra in the coming years. Or using a fluffy golden stonefly nymph less and less.

LESSON

Deepwater Indicator Fishing

Story and Photos by Lance Gray
Illustration by Ben Engle


LANCE'S DEEP-WATER INDICATOR SYSTEM
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BARREL SWIVEL #12
MEDIUM BOBBER STOP
SSG TO NO WEIGHT
BARREL SWIVEL #12
OR
18-20" LONG TIPPET 0X-7X FLUOROCARBON
FLY
OR
18-20" LONG TIPPET 0X-7X FLUOROCARBON
BALANCED FLY
FLY

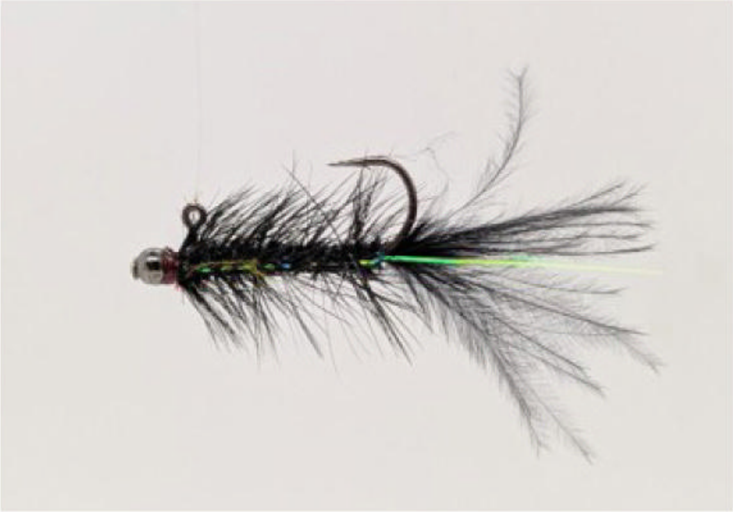
Many decades ago, using an indicator in deep water was unheard of in most fly-fishing situations. The standard approach was to fish sinking lines to get the fly down to the fish, or wait until fish were closer to the surface. But today, deepwater indicator tactics open up a whole new world for stillwater anglers.

I'd been using an indicator system on valley rivers and stillwater for a while, but they weren't built for depth. This deepwater setup I'll describe allows you to fish effectively at depths of 25 feet—or even more. When developing this system, I created numerous prototypes using various materials, indicators, and configurations. I asked for help from other fly-fishing gurus and even hired guides just to observe their approaches. Asking questions shortens the learning curve, and I hope this article does the same for you.

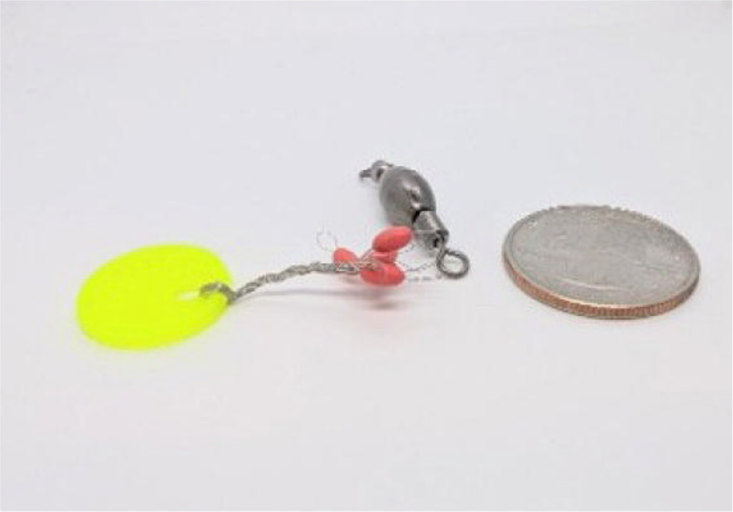
THE BEGINNING

When I first started using indicators, I relied on corkies and tapered leaders, fishing two to three feet deep with mayfly imitations—often using a Stillwater Bird's Nest by Milt Jensen that he designed for Butt Valley Reservoir. Later, when I started fishing and guiding rivers, I used poly yarn indicators attached by a loop-to-loop connection to tapered leaders. Both were adequate for what they were designed to do, but I kept looking for something better, especially for stillwater.

My river indicator system developed faster than the stillwater. I designed the river system for use on a drop leader. A drop leader is just that—a leader that is designed to drop your flies to a certain depth. It's typically not a tapered leader; instead, it's made from heavy material, like 20-pound fluorocarbon. I attach a barrel swivel at each end of the 8-foot section: one swivel is tied to the fly line using a 40-pound monofilament "cheater" (looped to the line and tied to the swivel), and the other swivel connects to the tippet. This setup lets me swap out tippet weights easily and roll up the leader when I'm done, ready for the next fishing trip. On the 20-pound fluorocarbon drop leader, I use three bobber stoppers on each side of my Gray's Indicator. These stoppers will hold the indicator in the desired position on the drop leader and allow for adjusting the fly depth by sliding the stoppers up or down. Since bobber stoppers use friction to grip, they heat up during adjustment. Fluorocarbon handles this better than mono—it won't curl up on you.



Deepwater fly at the balanced level using the friction of the terminal knot.



Deepwater bobber stoppers and weighted barrel swivels.

THE 'AHA' MOMENT

Since this system worked so well on rivers, I tried it on stillwaters. It worked great—but only reached about 12-13 feet deep. Way too deep to land fish, especially in a boat. You could bank the fish if you were onshore, but that's not great for fish health.

I adapted the system by using a pop-off indicator with the same basic leader structure and weight placed above the terminal barrel swivel to help the drop leader sink vertically. This system performed well when using stronger tippet (2X-4X), but its effectiveness decreased with lighter tippet material (5X-7X). The pop-off indicator would create such a great pop (snag and then give) that it would break the small tippet. I got very frustrated with it, especially while fishing Manzanita Lake.

Then came the breakthrough. While rigging up at Lake Almanor, I was explaining the pop-off system to my dad when he remarked, "Violent, isn't it?" The next day, I was setting up my river indicator system to fish midges at Manzanita Lake and forgot to place bobber stoppers on one side of the indicator. When I went to rig my fly rod with it, the indicator slid back and forth on the 20-pound drop leader. I screamed some profanities, sat down on the picnic bench, and realized I was on to something.

I jumped up and tied a 20-foot drop leader, with only one set of bobber stoppers, above the indicator, toward the fly line. This allowed the leader to sink while the indicator slid down until it hit the upper stoppers. Moving those stoppers lets me fine-tune depth. It was a magic moment. I fished Manzanita Lake the next day with 6X tippet and had no issues breaking off fish due to tippet failure caused by the indicator, and I could raise or lower the flies by moving the bobber stoppers up and down. I was brilliant!

SYSTEM UPDATES

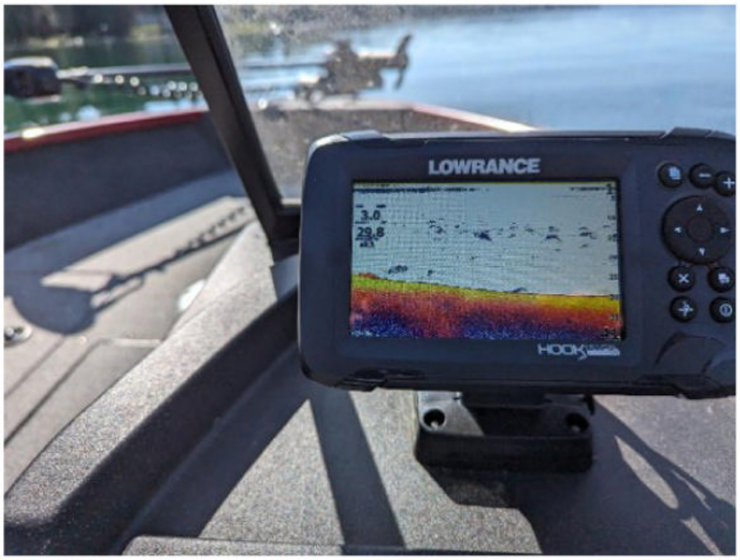
Today, my "Deepwater Leader" is built mostly the same, with a few tweaks:

- I use only one bobber stopper, positioned above the indicator towards the fly line barrel swivel.
- I use red bobber stoppers instead of black (easier to see in low light).
- A tungsten weight (SSG size) sits above the terminal swivel to help the leader sink vertically.
- I tie on 4–5 feet of tippet to get my terminal fly down to 25 feet.
- My flies are weighted—jig-style, balanced, or midges with tungsten beads or lead heads.

The heavier you go, the more you must consider your indicator's buoyancy. More weight requires more buoyancy. My Gray's Indicator holds about 1/8 ounce of weight. Always test your indicator with your chosen flies and weights before fishing.

DROPPING VS. CASTING

I typically drop this rig rather than cast it. If you're in a kayak or float



Deepwater fish finder—notice the mud bottom and the fish in the water column.

Keeping the rod tip over the fly allows for great leverage when a fish grabs. Lake Almanor fishing at 25 feet using a balanced hex.

tube, start with the fly and weight, let the leader sink, then place the indicator on the water. Think of it like soaking a crab pot. Remember, at twenty-five feet deep, you are approximately two and a half to three stories above the fly. Having your rod tip directly over this system about six to twelve inches above the indicator is a huge benefit. It allows you to set the hook quickly and maximize leverage.

You can cast this setup. The 20-pound fluorocarbon is stiff enough to cast efficiently. Use a water-load cast—cast the line to the rear of you and use the water to load your rod by dragging the line and leader along the water to make your forward cast. The indicator will slide down to the terminal barrel swivel, allowing you to cast all your line and indicator simultaneously. Afterward, you'll need to feed the line to the indicator using mends. This keeps the indicator from coming right to you. Remember, the further your fly is from your rod tip, the more slack you must manage when a fish hits. Keep your line tight or you'll lose all your leverage.

FISHING & TIPS

This deepwater indicator system works from five to 25 feet deep, depending on where you place the bobber stopper.

It is essential to know the entomology of what you are trying to imitate, including where they live and how they hatch. Midges live in mud. When they start to hatch, they leave their mud tubes by blowing a small gas bubble and floating to the surface. Once at the surface, they hatch from their exoskeletons into adults in a matter of seconds. Minnows hang around structures for safety, although some are found in deep water in bait balls. Weed beds, rocks, and logs will all hold different minnow species. Use a fish finder to read bottom structure, determine depth, and locate fish in the water column. Adjust your indicator to position your flies to match their depth.

When fishing midges, I stack them by color and depth on the tippet. I use red and black midges on days with less sun or deep water (15-25 feet). On lighter days or in shallow water (10-15 feet), I will fish with gray, red, and black midges, with gray-colored midges tied higher up on the tippet to reflect light and give the fish a more apparent silhouette.

With jig-balanced, lead-head flies, I fish one fly at a time. I use the same color choice as I do with midges. I prefer not to use a loop knot for these flies. Many fly fishers may be puzzled by this, but I like using a standard terminal knot. This lets me adjust how the fly sits in the water. Tightening the knot can level a poorly tied balanced fly or position a pattern like Gray's Balanced Hex at an upward 30° angle—mimicking the natural swim of Hexagenia nymphs.

Water surface movement is key to working both midges, balanced jigs, or lead-head flies. Waves give your flies animation in the water. Gentle waves give your flies subtle action. Larger waves give you more rise and fall in the water column. On calm days or when fish want a more erratic retrieve, add subtle rod lifts.

When you hook a fish, you will reel or strip the fluorocarbon drop leader into your hand, rod, and reel. Stick with 20-pound fluorocarbon—lighter material can cut your hands or groove your rod's tip-top guide.

The next step after catching and releasing your fish is to reset your leader system. During the fight with the fish, while reeling or stripping it in, your bobber stopper may move on your drop leader. Reposition your stopper, then reposition your fly in the previously selected angle position.

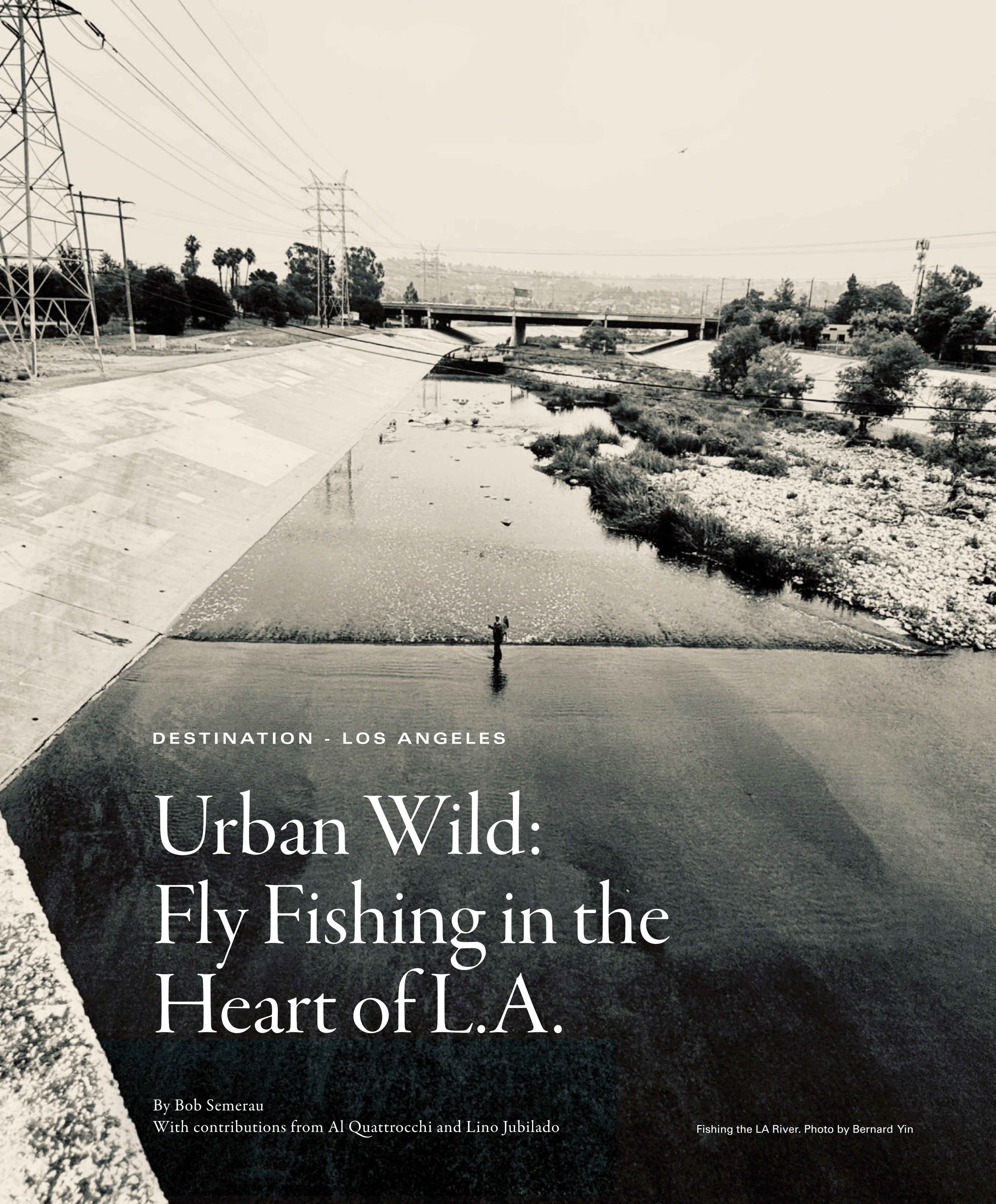
Fishing deep or shallow, whether for trout with midges or bass with the Float-N-Fly lead-head minnows, this system does it all. Once you get consistent with your setup and technique, you'll be able to troubleshoot problems, fine-tune your depth, and adapt on the fly—all of which lead to hooking more fish.

Wendy showing off a brown caught on a balance hex at Lake Almanor.

DESTINATION - LOS ANGELES

Urban Wild: Fly Fishing in the Heart of L.A.

By Bob Semerau
With contributions from Al Quattrocchi and Lino Jubilado



Fishing the LA River. Photo by Bernard Yin

Standing atop the Hollywood Hills, it's easy to see why Los Angeles might just be the best urban fly-fishing destination in America.

To the north and east, rugged foothills; to the west, endless Pacific shoreline. A river runs through it, and urban lakes are scattered throughout its neighborhoods. Few places offer such a blend of angling opportunity within a single metropolitan sprawl.

From the mountains to the sea—and dozens of points in between—Los Angeles offers a fly-fishing diversity that rivals its human one. And just like the city itself, it requires patience, understanding, and maybe a bit of movie-set magic to fully appreciate all the area has to offer.

The rhythm of Los Angeles beats to a unique mix of sirens, helicopters, palm trees, and freeways. The latter, often clogged, are a lifeline of arteries running through Los Angeles. Avoiding peak-hour congestion is one of the first strategies for getting around the vast landscape of Southern California.

The Mediterranean climate of Southern California greets you the moment you arrive. Normally balmy with very few off days, outings can be planned year-round. Whether exploring the foothills, taking to the beach, or stopping off somewhere in between, L.A. offers fly-fishing opportunities to suit any schedule. On top of that, with so many easy jumping off points for fishable areas, ease of access is just another reason L.A. is the number one urban fly fishing destination.

Heritage and Hollywood

Though it may not boast the gear-manufacturing legacy like San Francisco (see Spring 2025 edition of *California Fly Fisher*), Los Angeles is no slouch when it comes to fly-fishing pedigree. World-renowned fly tyers like John Van Derhoof and Bill Blackstone helped shape the regional craft, while clubs like the 100-year-old Long Beach Casting Club and the 78-year-old Pasadena Casting Club anchor a deeply rooted community. These clubs, along with a dozen others that are in Fly Fishers International's Southwest Council and in close proximity to L.A., represent thousands of dedicated anglers who practice the art of fly fishing and reflect the diverse populations of the region.

And then there's Hollywood. L.A.'s entertainment legacy has played a subtle yet powerful role in elevating fly-fishing's cultural presence. Few anglers haven't been stirred by *A River Runs Through It* or *Mending the Line*. A-list enthusiasts—from Harrison Ford and Kevin Costner to Henry Winkler and Jimmy Kimmel—don't just cast for the cameras; they cast because they love it. Their stories, photos, and advocacy help keep fly fishing in the public eye.

It's About the Fish

While all that is well and good, none of it matters without fish. And here, L.A. delivers. The region's waters support a long list of species that readily take a fly: striped bass, corbina, barred surf perch, halibut, yellowtail, calico bass, barracuda, bonito, leopard shark, spotfin croaker, guitarfish, catfish, freshwater bass, trout, redear, crappie, and of course, the urban legend—carp.

In the sections that follow, we share insights from some local talent, known for their prowess on the waters of this concrete jungle.

FLY FISHING THE L.A. SURF

Surf fishing L.A.'s shoreline gives anglers a shot at a wide variety of species, in a myriad of settings, which means using vastly differing techniques. From the rocky coastline at San Pedro to spots right alongside LAX, on up to the beautiful beaches of Santa Monica, the surf is easily accessible, and fish are everywhere.

Well known for his expertise bagging corbina, or "beans," in L.A. surf, Al Quattrocchi, known locally as "Al Q", gets the job done year-round but prefers summer months for successful corbina outings.

Al Q shares these tips for getting beans:

"While many anglers head inland for trout, savvy fly fishers are stalking corbina just steps from the Pacific Coast Highway. As soon as our flowering purple Jacaranda trees begin to bloom, the corbina start their way to the shallow surf line in search of sand crabs. And let me tell you, sight-fishing for these elusive fish in the surf is pure adrenaline."

Summer is when corbina move into the skinny water, eating sand crabs in very shallow surf. "These fish are fast, skittish, and bladder-less (yep, no swim bladder!), making them ideal for shallow sight-casting while spotting their backs as they slide through a set and pounce on sand crab beds," shares Al. "Look for tiny V-shaped ripples from sand crabs as waves recede, or bird tracks—they're nature's best fish finders. Where there's food, there's fish."

Gear Up for the Surf

Fly fishing the surf doesn't require much—just the right mindset and a few key pieces of gear.

Al Q suggests, "You'll want to simply wear a pair of flip flops or even go barefoot during summer months. Throw a 5-7 weight rod with a sealed-drag reel loaded with a 200-grain, 27-foot sinking head over 150+ yards of 30-pound Dacron backing. Round out the ensemble with polarized sunglasses, a hat, a stripping basket, and of course a solid attitude."

"Stretch and wet your fly line before casting—it'll shoot better. And keep that waterproof camera ready. Corbina aren't just fun to catch, they're definitely worth a brag shot," advises Al Q.

Your fly box should feature sand crab patterns like Surfin' Merkins and Holy Moleys (gray or salmon pink work great), or even small shrimp-style bonefish flies, all tied hook up clouser-style. Go for size #4 or #6 hooks.

"No need for tapered leaders, just a 7-foot length of 8-12-pound fluorocarbon will get the job done. It's best to tie on your fly with a non-slip loop knot, which allows the fly to move naturally and sink fast. Vary your retrieve speed until the fish show interest. And always keep moving. This is a cover-ground, stay-alert game," says Al Q.

Cast Like a Local

Perfecting the double haul will make a big difference, allowing you to stay on dry sand and cast further. The Belgian oval cast is another must-have, especially when using a sinking shooting head. This cast keeps your fly away from your face, but be mindful of your back cast. California beaches are busy places, and tangled lines with sunbathers or dogs are no fun. Early mornings after a low tide offer the most solitude and clean conditions. Always pinch your barbs, handle fish gently, and use the waves to help land and release your catch. Revive them in ankle-deep water until they swim off strong.

“Always point your rod tip low, right at the surf, and strip so you feel the end of your line. That tight line is the secret to sticking Corbina when they take. Just remember to feel your fly. Any slack or side current, and you’re out of the game,” concludes Al Q.

From Surf to Rivers and Lakes

Urban fly fishing in Los Angeles may seem improbable to outsiders, but for more than 40 years, Lino Jubilado has explored, fished, and fallen in love with the hidden angling opportunities nestled in the heart of the sprawling metropolis. From concrete-lined riverbeds to revitalized city lakes, Los Angeles offers a unique and world-class fishery that blends challenge, accessibility, culture, and community.

THE L.A. RIVER

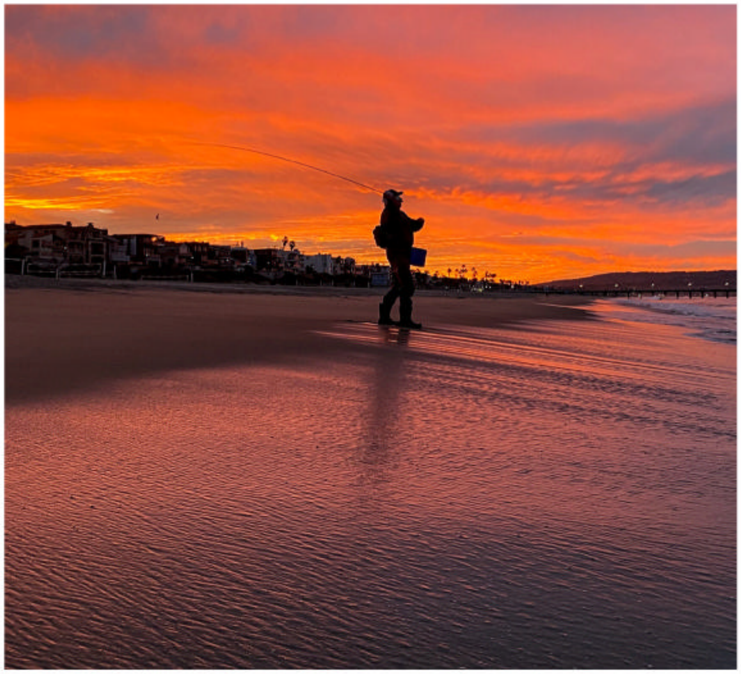
The L.A. River? Yes, the revitalized waterway that traverses much of Los Angeles provides a unique fishing opportunity.

“Many are surprised to learn that the Los Angeles River was once the area’s primary source of food and water. Today, despite its hardened banks and urban reputation, it’s regaining life as a thriving fishery—especially for fly anglers targeting 'sewer salmon,' the affectionate nickname for the powerful, elusive carp. These fish, some over 20 pounds, are a favorite of mine, offering thrilling fights on the fly,” Lino explains.

The water flowing through the concrete-lined riverbeds crisscrossing Southern California and L.A.’s urban lakes—such as Echo Park Lake, MacArthur Park Lake, and Lincoln Park Lake—comes from a combination of sources: natural springs, storm water runoff, and segments of the Los Angeles River. These lakes are regularly stocked with trout in the winter and catfish in the summer, further enhancing the variety of species available to the urban angler.

Gear

Along the rivers and lakeshores, Lino uses a 6-weight rod loaded with floating line and 1.5-2 feet of 12-pound fluorocarbon leader with 5 feet of 10-pound fluorocarbon tippet. The surgeon’s knot connecting the leader rig keeps the indicator above from slipping. His fly is one of his own. Time on the water led him to develop three signature fly patterns: the Skunk Buster, inspired by the crappie jig rather than traditional "match the hatch" flies, the Beach Buster, a variant of the Skunk Buster but designed specifically for the salt with a hard resin body and dumbbell eyes, and the Eggs and Ham fly, a playful take on an egg fly. This fly has helped many anglers land their first urban L.A. carp.



Sunrise at the surf. Photo by Al Quattrocchi

Timing

With the demands of everyday life keeping him busy, Lino enjoys the everyday accessibility of L.A.’s urban waters. The only real obstacle? Traffic. His tip: Fish early, leave late—or accept the crawl on the return. It’s worth it.

Community

Lino has worked hard to share and introduce hundreds of anglers from all over the world to the hidden waters of Los Angeles. He mentors foster youth through The Mayfly Project and supports women in fly fishing through groups like United Women on the Fly and Celine’s Fly Gals Weekend. He’s even hosted a fly-fishing event at Echo Park Lake where anglers fished from swan pedal boats, and he’s been featured in short films to raise awareness of the Los Angeles River’s beauty and fragility.

“Having spent decades fly fishing in these waters, I can confidently say L.A. is a world-class destination. I’ve caught my personal best bass—over 8 pounds—from Echo Park Lake, 20+ pound carp at MacArthur Park, massive leopard sharks in the surf, and corbina, often referred to as our Southern California bonefish. I’ve even caught striped bass up to 20 pounds from L.A.’s beaches,” says Lino. In fact, where else can you complete a “Surf and Turf Grand Slam—catching a leopard shark and corbina from the surf, then a carp from the L.A. River—all before 10:00 a.m.? Lino has, and it’s one of his proudest achievements.

Match the hatch with a crab pattern. Photo by Al Quattrocchi

OFF-SHORE OPPORTUNITIES

The coastline of L.A. affords some of the most beautiful vistas for watching the perfect postcard sunsets. But just a short distance offshore is where Captain Vaughn Podmore of Salty Fly Guide Service plies his trade. Experience at "The Wall," a mile-long stretch of rocks that protects the L.A. Harbor and beyond, has shown Captain Vaughn how to get larger model calico bass to eat a fly, as he explains:

"Working The Wall is really a matter of timing and using the right gear, but it fishes year-round. I tie on an orange sculpin pattern with a weed guard, and fish early when light is low, greylight. I use an 8-weight rod with a 6-foot 20-pound fluorocarbon leader tied to a 350-grain sinking head. Casting up along the rock pile of the breakwater, the retrieve drops the fly down along the pile and into deeper water. The rip comes pretty quickly and can be surprisingly strong."

Fishing from his New Robalo 246 Cayman center console, Captain Vaughn has learned that fighting feisty calico along the rocks inside or outside the L.A. Breakwater can be very productive. Catching and releasing 30 to 50 fish in a trip is not uncommon.

"But, for real excitement, we run offshore to Santa Catalina Island and fish for yellowtail, bonito, barracuda, and of course, calico. Using pretty much the same gear, maybe a longer leader, and switching to a baitfish imitation like the Sardinia pattern that I tie. These fish can be elusive, but once you find them, they will take a fly," shares Captain Vaughn.

A healthy carp from the L.A. River. Photo courtesy Lino Jubilado

VARIETY THAT KEEPS YOU COMING BACK FOR MORE

Chasing fish on the fly in Los Angeles is both exciting and very rewarding. With countless locations to explore—from mountain streams to urban park lakes to fish-rich surf—the city offers an unmatched variety of environments and species, many more than the singular species targeted in the city by the Bay, making Los Angeles, hands down, the fishiest city.

Editor's Note: We'd sincerely like to thank Al Quattrocchi, Lino Jubilado. Bernard Yin, and Vaughn Podmore, for their invaluable contributions to this L.A. Story. Also, we'd like to extend our heartfelt support and condolences to those around Los Angeles who have suffered because of the devastating fires of this past January. Together these fires caused the loss of 16,251 structures, and the burning of over 55,000 acres, including areas of South Malibu that remain closed to the public.

CRITERIA	COMMENTS	GRADE
Ease of Access	Excellent once you arrive, but traffic can be challenging	B+
Duration	Something is biting year-round	A+
Quality	Target species for fish of a lifetime, except trout, which are just for fun.	A–
Heritage	Hollywood influence, legendary fly tyers, A-list anglers	A+
Community	A dozen clubs and thousands of anglers are always ready to lend support	A+
Overall Grade	Diversity, great weather, plenty of fish, and people who really care about fly fishing	A

LA GUIDE

24 Hours In Los Angeles

By Bob Semerau

Places to Stay

When in L.A., join the fun and stay at a retro-chic, kitsch motel like the Safari Inn or the Tangerine, both in Burbank. These two exemplify the mid-century architecture and style of L.A. from films like Pulp Fiction, among others. For a more standard stay, check out the SpringHill Suites Los Angeles LAX/Manhattan Beach in the city of Hawthorne.

Start at the Beach

Plan your day to get an early start, arriving at Santa Monica Beach, south of the pier, on a day you are able to catch a returning low tide at first light. This will allow you the best opportunities as surf fills in pockets and fish begin to hunt crabs within the depressions. After sight-fishing the edge water for "beans" toss a streamer-style pattern like Lino Jubilado's red Beach Buster for leopards, striper, and whatever else might be lurking among the waves.

Get Down at "The River"

Grab a cup and a bite at Dogtown Coffee, 2003 Main Street, Santa Monica, before you take off from there and head to "The River." Best access to the Los Angeles River can be found in the Glendale Narrows where there is a good population of sizeable carp waiting to eat a fly. Sight fishing these lazy, skittish beasts means casting above and beyond with a strip down to their nose.

Good Eats

As the growling starts to grow, it's time for something from one of L.A.'s originals. Downtown L.A. is *Phillipe The Original*, serving classic French Dip sandwiches since 1908. Or head over to *The Hat*, for Pastrami Dip since 1951, out in Alhambra, on the way to Highway 39 and the San Gabriel West fork.

If you didn't get to grab a cup before leaving the beach, or even if you did, stop in at 10 Speed Coffee in Frogtown, 3014 Worthen Avenue, L.A., conveniently located directly on the river and brewing great espresso.

Find Trout on the West Fork San Gabriel River

Get an adventure pass at any approved retailer in Azusa (the Arco station right off the 210, for one) for $5.00 to allow parking up canyon. The best access is parking near the bridge, about 14 miles from the Arco. Hike as far upriver as feels comfortable, then start casting your 3-weight. Stay left at the junction of the East Fork and keep going up. Stop when you get to Cogswell Reservoir, a distance of about 7 miles. These fish are not huge, but they love to eat small dries and nymphs of all kinds.

Fisherman's Spot Fly Shop

For local knowledge, Fisherman's Spot can't be beat. Whatever your targeted species or area you want to fish, they have the intel and the gear to make it happen. They've been around since 1970 at their Sherman Oaks location, with founder Steve Ellis still running the operation today along with partner Ken Lindsay.

Dinner Break After A Long Day

Now it's time to really eat. Drive back to the San Fernando Valley and get some excellent BBQ at Dr. Hogly Wogly's Tyler Texas BBQ. Or keep it simple and get the burger of your dreams at Fat Sal's, also in "The Valley."

Some Sights To Be Seen

While L.A. is very fishable, here are a few iconic L.A. locations not to be missed. Drive through Griffith Park, see the Hollywood Sign, and visit the Griffith Observatory for awesome L.A. views. At Grauman's Chinese Theater (now TCL Chinese Theater), you can touch film-making history and maybe even meet Batman, then walk the Hollywood Walk of Fame. When fishing on Santa Monica beaches, make time to walk the pier, stopping to enjoy the rides. The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures and the nearby La Brea Tar Pits, and the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History are worth the time investment away from the water for a day.

L.A. Adjacent

By Bernard Yin

Gazing to the east or north from atop the Hollywood Hills, any fly angler will see incredible fishing potential in the mountains surrounding the Los Angeles basin. The San Gabriel Mountain foothills are a short distance along the 210 freeway, high above Azusa, and home to the East and West Forks of the San Gabriel River. Further off are the San Bernardino Mountains, still reachable for a day's outing. To the north are the lower Los Padres National Forest and the western edge of the Angeles National Forest.

Bernard Yin has fished these waters for many years, and his experience and skills in mountain stream fishing are recognized around Southern California. Here, he shares some pointers for getting trout just beyond the L.A. sprawl:

San Gabriel Mountains

"For many, this is the spot where the first trout was caught as a youth, and today holds fish worthy of the adventure. The forks of the San Gabriel River (more like creeks) have self-sustaining trout populations. The majority of the West Fork between Highway 39 and Cogswell Reservoir is designated a catch-and-release fishery, and the further you hike (or bike) along it, the better the fishing and the fewer people you'll run into. This, and the other forks, are prone to weekend warriors having their picnics to such a degree that it can make you wonder if you ever left the city. If you have flexibility, I recommend fishing anywhere in the L.A. region on weekdays only," advises Bernard.

San Bernardino Mountains

A little further to the east are these equally gnarly mountains. Mount San Gorgonio lives in this range and is the highest peak in Southern California's transverse ranges at 11,503 feet. Like the San Gabriel Mountains, snowmelt factors in, and some of these streams stay icy all year. The Santa Ana River, Bear Creek, and Deep Creek are well-known destinations for the fly angler. It's not unusual to run into brown trout in this region. Interestingly, the Pacific Crest Trail follows a good stretch of Deep Creek. A stretch of the South Fork Santa Ana River near Seven Oaks does receive planted fish and isn't a bad spot to introduce someone to fly fishing in SoCal.

North of L.A.

Anglers can fish in the lower Los Padres National Forest as well as western edge of the Angeles National Forest. Here, the Piru Creek drainage serves as the easiest resource for a fly-fishing fix. With its headwaters in the San Emigdio Mountains (another transverse range) and its rugged path through two reservoirs and deep canyons, it can truly keep the angler busy. See the Fall 2024 issue of ***California Fly Fisher*** for more on this watershed. There currently is no stocking anywhere within the drainage except for Pyramid Lake. As with anywhere, please respect these wild and self-sustaining trout.

Spring is generally the best season to fish the foothills. During warmer months, be on guard for rattlesnakes, carry water or a water filter, bug repellent, layers, sun protection, and preferably a lighter and shorter fly rod. No hero casts required, and given that most fish run smallish (11" is considered large), this is a great place to put your 3-weight to use. Beadhead nymphs, dries such as Elk Hair Caddis, Adams, terrestrials, and Woolly Buggers are fine. A basic indicator rig or hopper-dropper setup is also effective. These fish are rarely selective, and a basic 'Western' fly arsenal will serve you well.

Exploring the local mountains requires some planning and a little extra gear for your safety and well-being. Taking a few minutes in advance can ensure that your trip is both fun and successful. As with any trek into mountainous areas, it is best to bring a partner or leave word of your intended plans with people back home. Be sure to check the regulations for the area and fish barbless.

Stalking trout in the San Gabriel Mountains.
Photo by Matthew Benton

The mountains around L.A. are home to wild trout.
Photo by Bernard Yin

TECHNIQUE/TIPS

Surf Fishing 101

By George Revel

You have likely heard the siren songs of the surf while visiting California's vast coastline. The terns squawking and waves crashing, calling you to cast your line in.

IGFA world-record holder Kesley Gallagher with an L.A. corbina. Photo by Scott Leon.

As anglers, the presence of water elicits many questions, the most essential being, "I wonder what I can catch in it?" The curious angler is the angler who will excel and eventually master fishing in the surf, as there is much to be curious about. A departure from the predictability of rivers and lakes, where most anglers have honed their skills, the surf requires a deeper understanding of current conditions as they change daily. The cool, misty air, the limitless potential, and the challenge of figuring out an entirely new method of fishing make the surf a worthy pursuit. Fishing from the sand has become an obsession that captivates and perplexes me in the way wading a trout stream did when I first fell in love with fly fishing.

All this said, my first experience in the surf was a miserable failure. I tried to conquer the Pacific Ocean with my steelhead rod mid-day without a stripping basket. It chewed me up and spit me out. One does not conquer the ocean but needs to learn its rhythms and dance with it.

TARGET SPECIES

One of the most unique aspects of fishing the surf is that a fish of a lifetime is a real potential on any given cast. Running into a school of Chinook feeding on surf smelt fuels every 4:30 a.m. wake up. Surf perch are among the most plentiful and year-round species to target in the surf up and down the California coast. Depending on location, most surf anglers graduate from perch to chase striped bass, halibut, or corbina. For Southern California anglers, corbina is the jewel of the beach, feeding in the shallows. They are often sight-fished on a 6 or 7 weight in the summer. At the same time, striped bass captivate anglers wielding 8 and 9 weights from Pajaro to Gualala.

GEAR

Rods

One of the most significant barriers to fishing the surf is that your 9-foot 5 weight has little application. Fly rods for surf fishing typically range from 6-9 weight in single-hand and double-hand configurations. Single-hand rods in nine to 10-foot configurations are ideal. At the same time, two-hand rods in the 11-foot range are best. Longer rods aid in casting over the waves and can increase distance. Two-handed rods lower the barrier to entry by providing distance and line speed without perfecting the double-haul.

Lines

A foggy morning at Ocean Beach. Photo by George Revel

Fly lines are where things start to vary significantly. My fastest-sinking option is my most commonly used surf line, sinking at 7-9 inches per second. The Rio Outbound Short series offers a variety of sink rates for the angler. The Rio Outbound Short features a 30 foot overweighted head that minimizes backcast space needs and the number of false casts needed. Generally, the fastest sink option is best for the broadest array of beaches and swells. The small diameter of the fast-sinking line cuts through the wind and does not get pushed around by the waves as much. Rocky or shallow areas without much swell are better suited for a line that sinks in the 2-5 inches per second range. For tippet, I prefer a 20-30 pound fluorocarbon tippet for its abrasion resistance, but nylon has better strength with the inevitable wind knots of a beginning surf angler.

Flies

Keep it simple: The easy-to-tie and durable Adachi Clouser in various sizes and colors is a great place to start. They are a modern take on the Clouser minnow tied with synthetic materials and a long flash tail. Favorite colors include surf brown, black and white, and chartreuse. Choose smaller flies for perch and corbina and select larger flies for striper and halibut. 80% of fish I catch are on a crab or baitfish imitation. I recommend that you pinch your barbs on your fly in case you hook yourself. Choose a fly size and weight that is easy for you to cast at first.

Clothing Waders and Other Gear

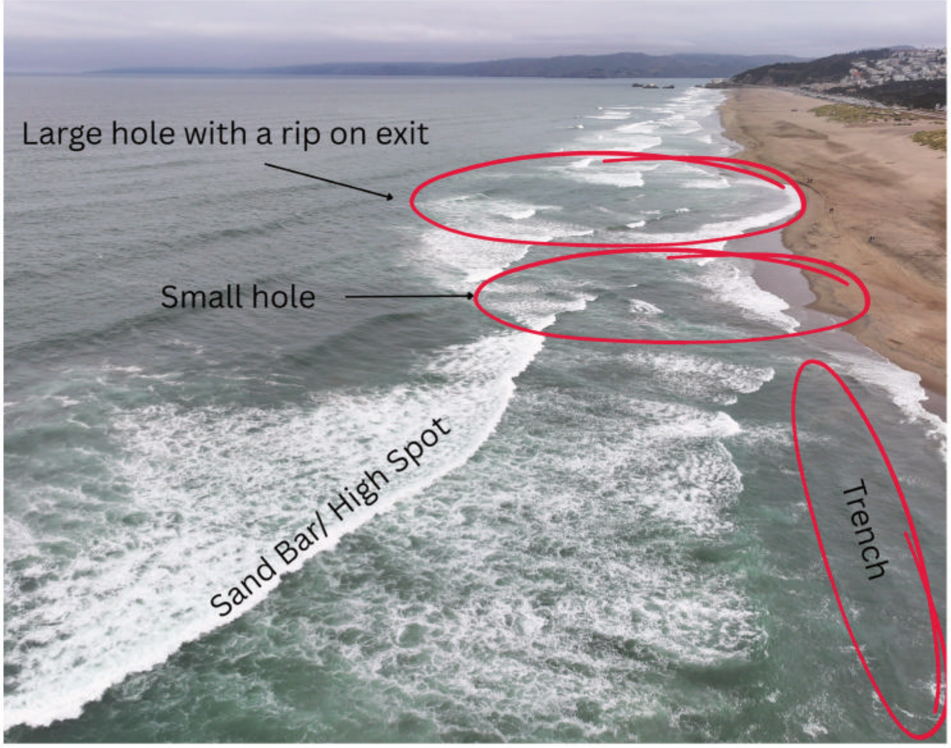
Many anglers wear waders. However, I prefer to be unencumbered, wearing shorts and barefoot whenever possible, even in the 50-degree temps of the Outer Sunset District of San Francisco. I dress in warm gear above my waist to keep my core warm. Feeling the bed of sand crabs under my feet lets me know I am where the food is and the fish are likely to be. A lightweight rain shell is nice when not wearing waders, and it is essential when wearing waders. It will keep a rogue wave from dumping water down your waders. One should also wear a tight wading belt and consider a PFD if wearing waders. It is not uncommon for anglers to drown at the beach because they did not take the proper precautions. While on the note of safety, you should, without question, wear your sunglasses.

The other oddity in surf fishing is that you need to use a stripping basket. The stripping basket holds the line when stripping in. The basket keeps your fly line out of the water so that it shoots better and does not tangle around your feet. Strap on your stripping basket low on your stripping line-hand side.

APPROACH

Your first step to fishing the beach could be before you acquire your gear. Surf anglers consider many variables when fishing on the beach. The most critical factors are wind, swell, and tide. The effect of these will vary from beach to beach, but I will give you some very simplistic guidelines. For a beginning angler, wind below 10 mph is best when considering whether to fish. More advanced casters can handle up to about 15 mph. Note that the wind tends to lay down at the very end of the day and in the mornings as inland temps cool. I use the app Windy for weather forecasts. For swell, look for waves below six feet. As for tides, I prefer an incoming tide with the idea that it pushes fish closer to the shoreline. I will fish any tide but will choose my beach or location based on previous experience. For swell and tide, I use the Surfline app.

To make sense of these variables, there is no substitute for experience. My motto with fishing has always been, "There is only one way to find out, and that is to go." Want to know what a 15-mile-per-hour wind



Surf fishing is about finding water you can fish, not water you wish to fish. Photo by George Revel

from the north feels like at Stinson Beach? Go! Then you will know if you want to go again when you see it on the forecast. To learn the swell and tide, you don't even need to fish to learn. Observe the conditions on the beach. When I was new to surf fishing, I found it helpful to jot down notes on when things went well or didn't go well for future visits.

My first step when approaching the beach is to pause and observe from a point of elevation whenever possible. The structure on the beach is much more evident from high ground than when you are at water level. Reading the surf did not come easily, having grown up in the unidirectional world of trout streams. Look for dark water, calm spots, birds, and other anglers. Watch the waves crash, seeing where the waves form and break, indicating sandbars and shallower water, where the waves relax and indicate deeper water (what we want to fish.) Look for the tell-tale jiggle of deep water, whether trench or hole. Watch the white foam, noticing how it's moving. Is there a persistent pattern like a rip current that funnels food to a specific zone? Look for spots that are as close to shore as possible. Surf fishing is about finding water you can fish, not water you wish to fish. Once you have identified a likely spot or spots, make a mental note of some landmarks (that won't move), and walk down to the water. Now is a great time to take some time to stretch your line. The more time spent stretching you line the less your line will tangle when casting.

Once at the water's edge, take a deep breath and smell the air. Open your arms and take in the power of the ocean. I recommend walking forward as the waves recede and back as they come at you. Establishing a rhythm with waves is critical when fishing the Pacific Ocean. A fly angler is a speck in something astonishingly vast. You need to figure out how to work with it, as working against it is a losing battle.

CASTING AND FISHING

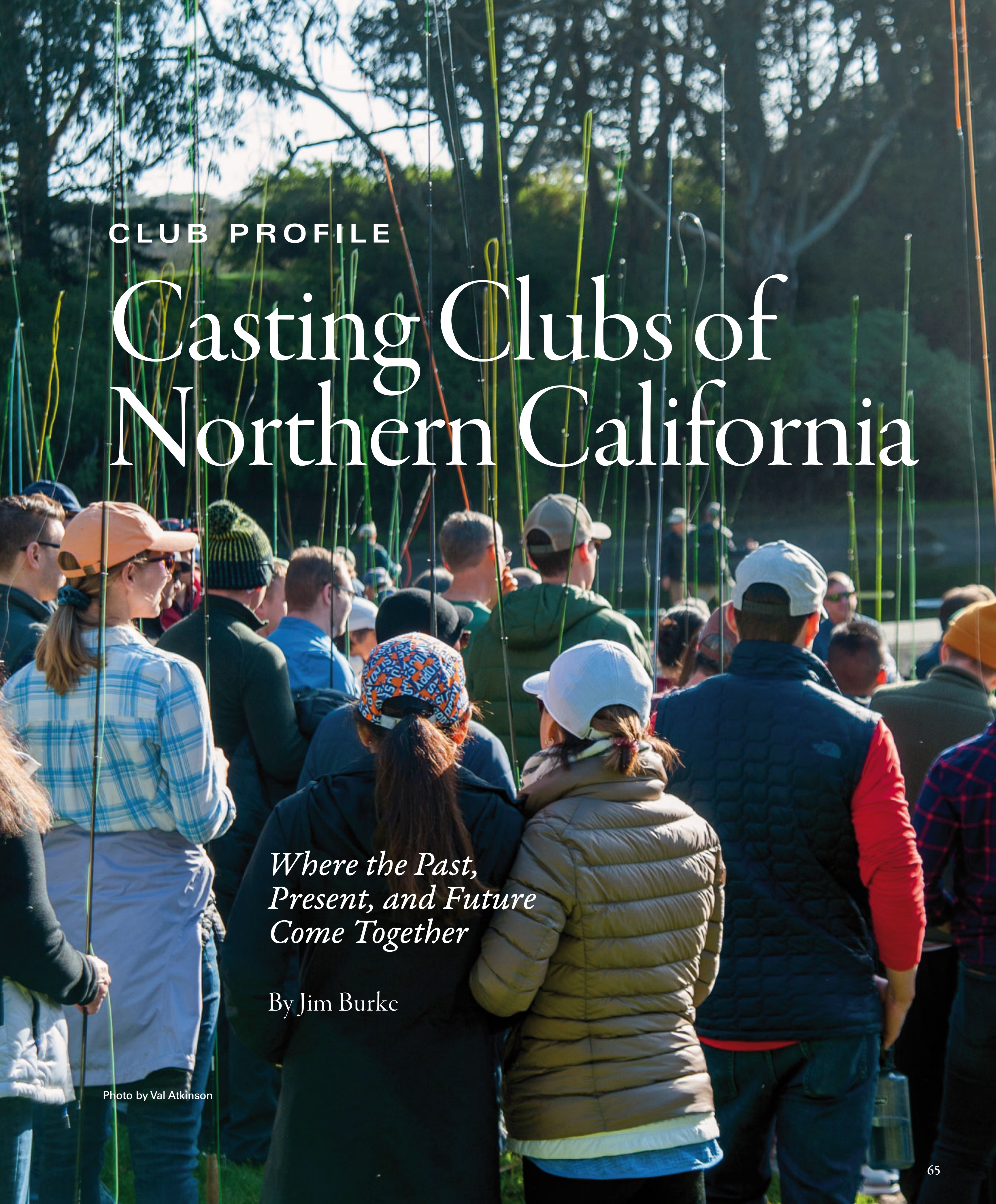
Once you have developed a rhythm with your feet, look behind you for beachgoers or dogs to begin casting while advancing as the wave recedes. Your cast should be powerful and timed to land on the backside of the wave. Use false casts to time the wave. As soon as your fly lands, walk backward to keep your tension. Strip aggressively to target larger predator species and shorter shrimpy strips for perch. The goal is to stay tight to your fly so that when it gets smacked, you can strip set on the fish and prepare for a potentially legendary battle with a species you had not even fathomed of.

Fish hard and keep moving, cast all around the edges of the structure, and stay head-on. I like to think about where a fish may enter the deep water and where it may dead-end. The dead-end point may be where a fish lingers, looking for options. *SMACK* Keep calm, and don't trout set. Strip hard to set the hook. Only then can you lift the rod and begin fighting the fish. After a heart-pounding battle with your sea creature, you must land the fish. Use the waves to push the fish toward you. Be careful to ease on pressure when the waves recede. Wait for a decent wave to push it up on the beach.

Smile! You have just done something extraordinary. You caught a fish on a fly rod in the Pacific Ocean with your feet in the sand.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Go in the morning, the wind is typically down.
- Stretch your line before fishing. Stretching will prevent the line from tangling when shooting out.
- Only pull off as much line as you can reliably cast. You want to hit the reel every cast.
- Cover ground looking for structure that is close to the beach.
- Keep your eyes peeled for bait jumping and strange movements in the water. Often, it's a fish.
- Check behind you before casting. People love to stand behind us and watch.
- Choose a fly that you can easily cast at first.
- Learn the beach closest to you or that you go to often.



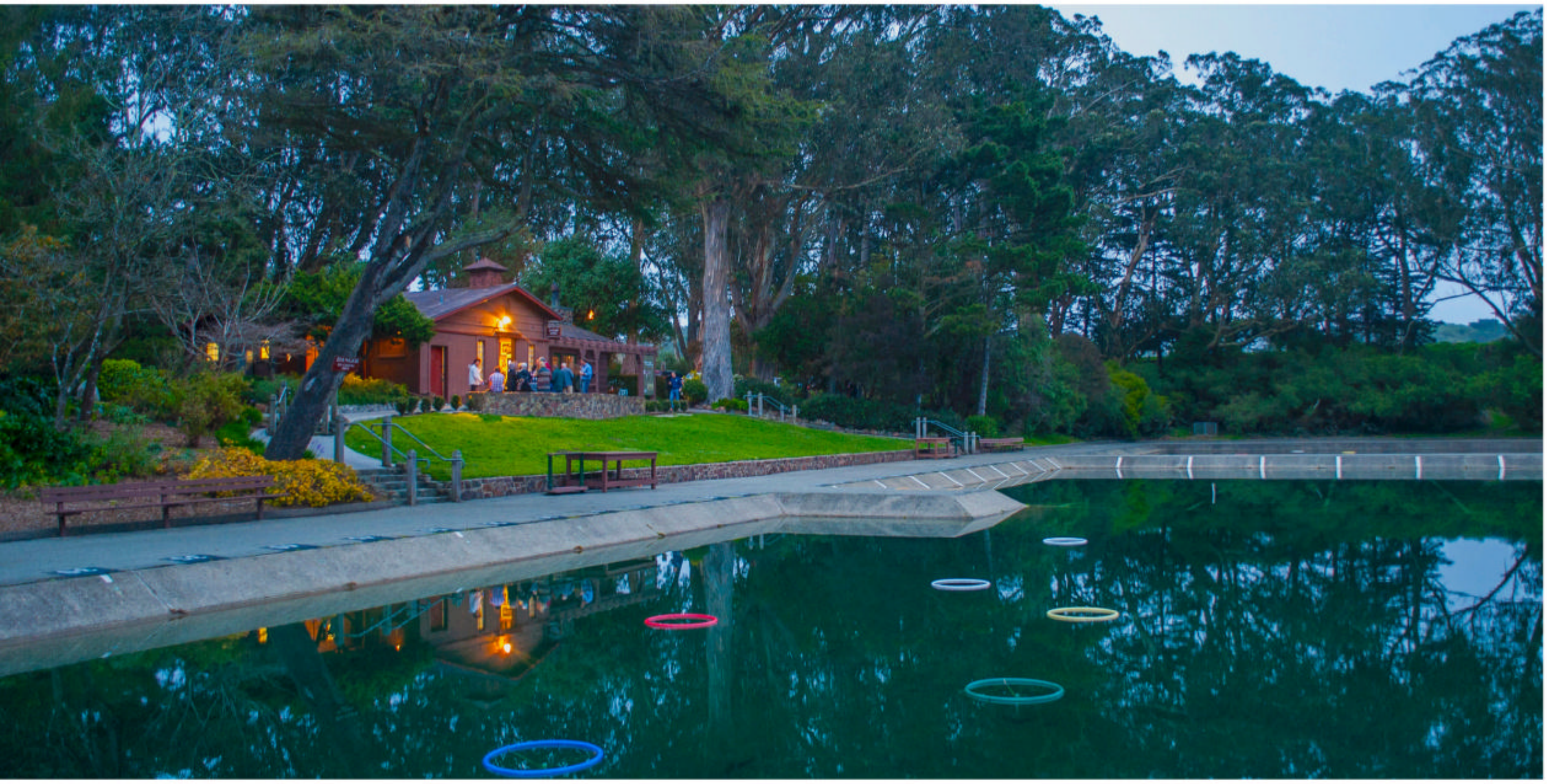
CLUB PROFILE

Casting Clubs of Northern California

Where the Past, Present, and Future Come Together

By Jim Burke

Photo by Val Atkinson



Since the club's completion in 1938, the GGACC has been a hub of innovation for the sport. Photo by Val Atkinson

When you visit the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club (GGACC) for the first time, you feel the past, present, and future in constant conversation with one another. Buffalo roam in their paddock across the street from the entrance; horses amble through nearby stables, just visible through the trees that help keep the casting ponds a well-kept secret; coyotes howl from the surrounding woods as darkness falls each day.

Entering the parking lot—taking care not to run over someone zipping past on an electronic skateboard or collide with the driverless cars that swarm Golden Gate Park—all your modern-world worries begin to recede. Your pulse slows. That is, until you round the clubhouse and behold the three magnificent casting pools, where fly lines in different colors unfurl as the whoosh of a long spey rod marks the end of a cast.

Thomas McGuane described this place in *The Longest Silence*:

> "The [GGACC] clubhouse and casting pools are on an elevation that is shaped like a small mesa. It is a single story, dark and plain, and faces pools surrounded and overhung by immense fragrant eucalyptus trees. The clubhouse is thoroughly grown in with laurel and rhododendron, and—after street-level Golden Gate—the effect is distinctly otherworldly."

The Anglers Lodge is the log cabin every fly fisher dreams of, complete with an assortment of salty anglers on the porch arguing about the merits of some rod, reel, river, or any of the other things passionate anglers love to debate and embellish.

Inside the lodge, you sense the past in the knotty pine walls, the rough-hewn thresholds, and the craftsman doors hung on wrought iron doorknobs with strap hinges that still bear the mark of a blacksmith's hammer. Every detail honors the spirit of craftsmanship and the club's commitment to learning and excellence.

The walls themselves tell the history of fly fishing through photographs, legendary rods mounted on hooks, and framed flies not just tied but invented by GGACC members. As with any sacred site to which people make pilgrimage, visitors find here artifacts that honor the tradition of innovation and achievement that are part of the club's legacy—and essential to the story of the sport itself.

One such relic is the original Horner Deer Hair, a fly Lefty Kreh claimed was one of the few he'd carry anywhere, broadly known as the Humpy. If the day is nice, you might even borrow Lefty's book *The Professionals' Favorite Flies* from the club library and head outside to read more about Jack Horner's distinctive patterns at a table near the west end pool, known as Horner's Corner.

Wherever you turn, you see yourself reflected in the once-bright plaques honoring greats like Steve Rajeff, 45-time American Casting Association Grand All-Around Champion and 14-time World Casting Champion. Tacked up by the coffee pot in the rod locker room are articles about Maxine McCormick, who, at just 12, became the youngest gold medalist in the adult division at the World Casting Championships. Her coach, Chris Korich—a 12-time world champion himself—continues to shape the sport and its rising stars at the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club, where past and present are joined like a perfectly tied blood knot.

Since its establishment in 1933, the GGACC has been a hub of innovation for the sport. On its ponds, members helped shape key features of the Pflueger Medalist reel and advanced bamboo rod design for R. L. Winston and the E. C. Powell Rod Company. Jimmy Green—namesake of the club's Spey-O-Rama—pioneered graphite and boron rods. GGACC members also led breakthroughs in fly lines, including the development of shooting heads and new materials like nylon, Dacron, and bonded plastic. The rod and line weight systems still used today were born here at the club.

While the GGACC holds a special place in the angling community, it is not the only casting club in Northern California. In addition to more than 60 fly-fishing clubs across the region, there are two other casting clubs that host their own competitions, classes, and events: the Oakland Casting Club (established in 1941) and the Flycasters of San Jose (founded in 1965).

OCC board member—and its most accomplished and longstanding caster—Chris Korich shared:

"Since it was founded, members of the Oakland Casting Club have won hundreds of national and world casting titles and set many records in the process. Equally impressive, our members have made significant contributions to casting technique, instruction, tackle design, and fly line standardization, which have helped millions of anglers around the globe. Fortunately, the club's cumulative angling, casting, and equipment expertise continues to be shared freely at our wonderful casting pools."

Echoing many of the themes common to both OCC and GGACC, Frank Eldredge, vice president of the Flycasters of San Jose, celebrates the spirit of generosity and growth that defines his club:

"One of the common themes is the array of skills and experience among our club members—and their willingness to share their expertise. I came to the club as a very experienced fly fisherman, having graduated from bait and lure fishing at the tender age of 14. I didn't necessarily expect to add much to my skill set by joining the club, but I quickly discovered areas where I could grow as a fly fisherman by taking advantage of classes and seminars."

While these three casting clubs each offer their own "home waters," the angling opportunities available throughout Northern California extend their reach far beyond city limits. Through regular fishouts—or "Rondies," as the clubs call them—members can experience everything from spey casting on the American River to float-tubing for bass, ladder fishing for Lahontan cutthroat trout on Pyramid Lake, or surfcasting for stripers off the beaches of San Francisco.

These casting clubs, in other words, are not only about becoming master casters—they're about putting those skills to the test on the wild, varied waters of California and beyond.

At the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club, that blend of technical excellence and real-world adventure is grounded in something even deeper: a sense of community. While the awards and articles throughout the Anglers Lodge showcase the GGACC's storied past, it's the people—and the programs they build—that make the club what it is today. The true legacy of the GGACC lives in the friendships, mentorship, and shared joy found around the ponds.

Programs like the Women's Program and Project Healing Waters exemplify how the club creates inclusive, supportive spaces for anglers of all backgrounds and abilities. Whether it's a casting clinic led by certified instructors, veterans learning to tie flies, or newcomers preparing for their first fishout, what binds it all together is the spirit of generosity and connection.

Even outside formal programs, the community thrives. On any afternoon you might see spey casters tracing elegant lines across the water, trading tips, stories, or a good laugh—maybe even a pour of bourbon. And on other evenings, the club hosts speakers on everything from conservation to the poetry of fly fishing. One such evening, author Mark Kurlansky spoke about his book *The Unreasonable Virtue of Fly Fishing*, posing a series of questions that linger in the minds of many anglers:

"Should you take the fish? Should you fish on a sunny or overcast day? In the river or from the bank? With colorful flies or not? What do these fish like to eat? At what time of day?"

He concluded, "These types of questions are endless, but underlying them all is a more fundamental question, the question of all questions: Why do it?" Spend a little time here, and the answer becomes clear.

The Learn to Fly Fish (LTFF) program reflects the GGACC's commitment to education and camaraderie. Many who enter the program unsure of their abilities leave not only as competent anglers, but as mentors eager to give back. That cycle of learning and sharing defines the club.

High school English teacher Mike Olausen joined LTFF as a beginner. "The three-year program started with the basics, then moved to trout and moving water, and eventually to bass topwater techniques, tightline tactics, and stillwater indicators," he said. "I went from thrashing a line hopelessly at snickering fish to a relatively competent angler. Now I can truly appreciate my time on the water. I only hope to pay it back by becoming a mentor, as so many others have."

LTFF directors Alan Dye and Thomas Knoble have expanded the program to include monthly Casting Labs and fly-tying sessions—informal, welcoming gatherings now known affectionately as "Casting and Carbs," thanks to the steady flow of banana bread and cookies participants bring for the sharing. As Alan puts it, "There's nothing like the smile on a student's face—whether they're eight or 80—when something finally clicks."

That sense of joy and connection resonates with many, including the author of this piece. Through LTFF and other GGACC programs,

Val Atkinson

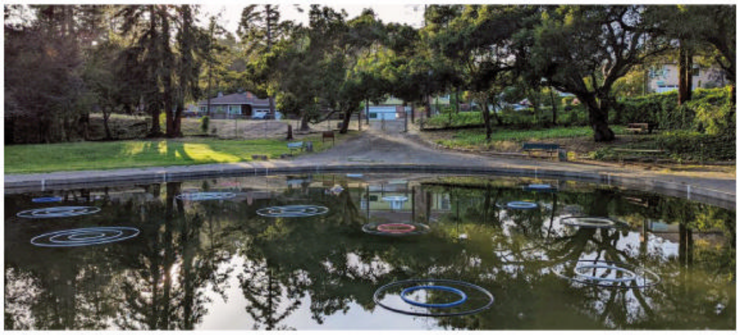
GGACC's OG anglers hanging out in Horner's Corner—Art Dollosso, Jim Adams, and Russell Chatham. Photo by Val Atkinson

I found a passion I didn't know I needed and friendships that now feel foundational. The club doesn't just teach you how to fish—it gives you people to fish with.

Victoria Scigliano, a nurse practitioner in San Francisco, echoes that sentiment. "Honestly, what makes fishing so amazing is the time I get to spend with my dad at the ponds or on a river thanks to the LTFF. I still can't name one fly or fish, but I've had endless fun times with my dad. GGACC provides a wonderful bonding experience for our family. Now that my little brother has joined LTFF, it's given us a whole new way to gather, laugh, and make new friends."

Drop by any day and you'll see the past and future of fly fishing side by side. You might catch a glimpse of Willy George guiding future instructors through a tough cast, shouting "Hot dog!" when someone nails it. Or you'll see LTFF grads stepping up to become certified instructors themselves, ready to pay forward the wisdom they've received.

Whether it's a father and daughter casting side-by-side, or a lone angler refining her spey cast under a darkening sky, what endures at the GGACC is a devotion not just to the craft, but to one another. The commitment to casting, competition, and community runs like a tight line from the past into the future.



Members of the Oakland Casting Club have won hundreds of national and world casting titles and set many records in the process. Photo courtesy WhereDoITakeTheKids.com

Alan Dye and Thomas Knoble lead the Learn to Fly Fish Program at GGACC. Photo by Mark Johann

Annual crab feed at GGACC. Photo by Val Atkinson

CLUB INFORMATION

Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club

Founded in 1933 (first founded as San Francisco Fly Casting Club in 1894)

Golden Gate Park
1232 John F Kennedy Dr
San Francisco, CA 94121

- Members: 1,300+
- Ponds are free and open to the public dawn to dusk
- Individual membership $40 a year. Family and youth membership available. GGACC.org

Oakland Casting Club

Founded in 1941

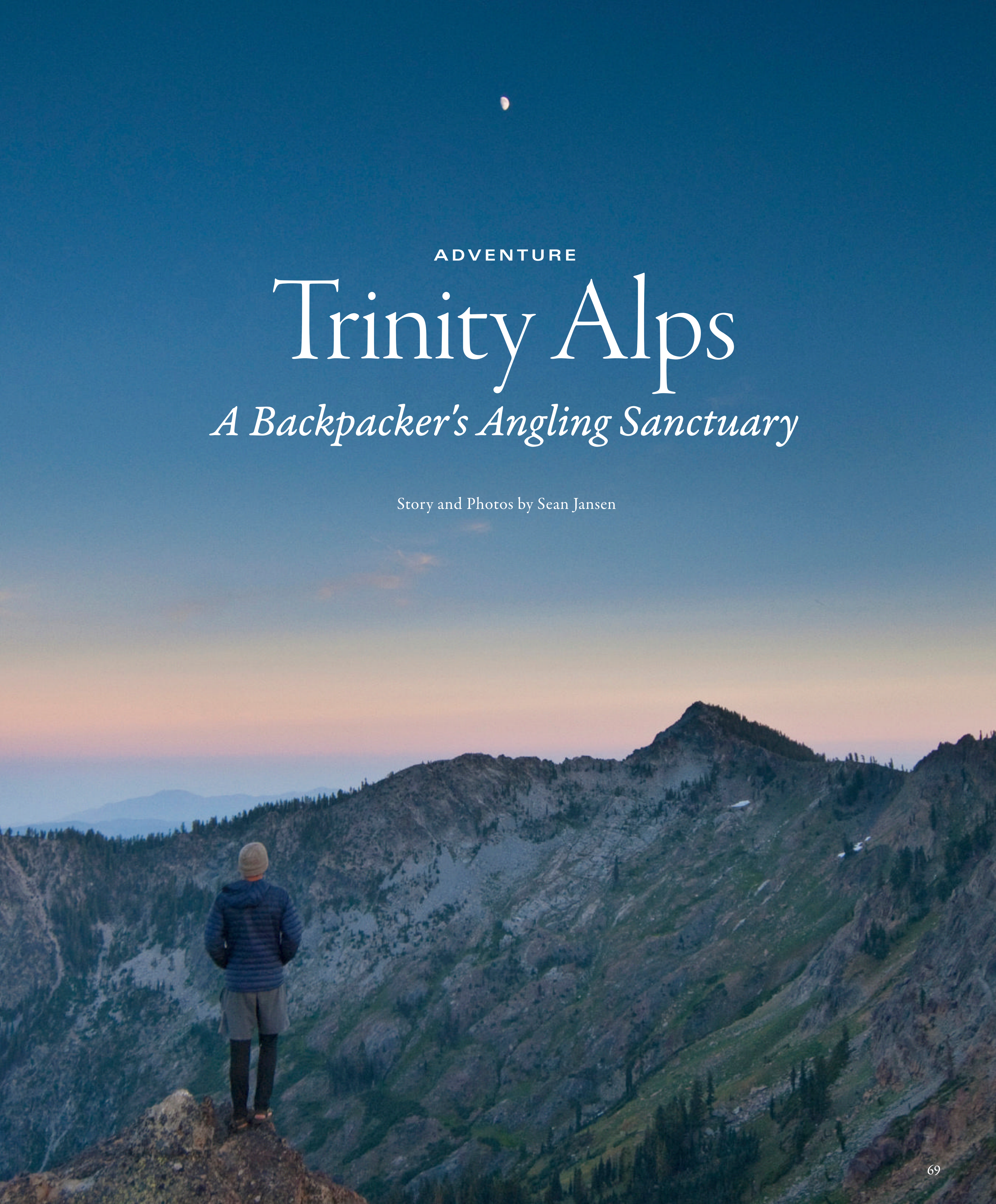
McCrea Memorial Park
Elinora Ave at Carson St
Oakland, CA 94619

- Members: 150 members
- Pools are free and open to the public dawn to dusk
- Individual membership $30 a year. Family and youth membership available. OaklandCastingClub.org

Flycasters of San Jose

Founded in 1965
Los Gatos Creek Park
1250 Dell Ave
North end of park
Campbell, CA 95008

- Members: 295 members
- Casting ponds are free and open to the public dawn to dusk
- Park entry fee required
- Stocked pond in the park
- Individual membership $50 a year. Family and youth membership available FlyCasters.org



ADVENTURE

Trinity Alps

A Backpacker's Angling Sanctuary

Story and Photos by Sean Jansen

The Trinity Alps, nestled just south of the Oregon border yet a five-hour drive north of California's state capital, span more than half a million acres of untamed wilderness.

Remote, serene, and largely untouched, the area is blissfully devoid of human interference. With mountain peaks like Mount Thompson rising to 9,002 feet, and her friends nearby tickling that same height, alpine vistas are guaranteed. While not as high as the Sierra, these northern, coastal peaks demand equal respect and showcase more inclement and unpredictable weather.

Every trail into this wilderness begins gently, within the towering canopy of pine forests, then suddenly explodes into an uphill scramble of granite to unlock the region's hidden gems—its alpine lakes.

Unlike the Sierra's John Muir Trail, which I compare to Highway One down the California coast, linking the area's natural beauty from point A to point B along a single, majestic spine, the Trinity Alps are more like the New York City subway. There's no one trail that leads you to a chain of lakes or connects you to a line of mountain peaks to summit. Instead, picture the alpine lakes as Grand Central Station with routes circling around it and branching off in every direction.

Most anglers who venture into this wilderness take the weekend-warrior approach: Hike in, fish, and hike back out. But these lakes called to me. So I made a personal vow: to spend an entire summer exploring them, one weekend at a time. I wanted to see what they had to offer—and who, or what, called them home.

As the days began to heat up and winter rains started to fade, I couldn't help but shoulder my backpack and strap in my fly rod. I would get anxious and riddled with guilt if I saw a day that was too perfect to ignore. My treatment for the ailment was simple.

My very first backpacking trip—ever—was in this wilderness, back when I was in college. The crunch of dirt beneath my boots stirred that memory instantly. This landscape had created the trail monster I had become. Returning felt like a thank-you. A pilgrimage to the place that opened my eyes to what was possible.

The first trip of the season was one of the longer ones, but with the length came a higher value for the destination. The trail meandered beside a river of the same name, gradually guiding me up and toward the lake from which it flowed. The sheer difficulty of the 4,000 feet of elevation gain and a pack heavy with food slowed me down, but what really held me up were endless fishing opportunities along the way. The creek flowed cold and clear over boulders and through deadfall of trees, forming perfect eddies and deep pools where trout surely hid.

Once I got to the lake, though, the hard work, sore calves, and sunburnt forehead were worth it. The views? Somewhere in the thesaurus under "amazing." The trout? Apparently, they knew they weren't the stars of the show. I didn't get so much as a strike. It was late May, and there were still icebergs floating in the lake. Maybe I was there a little too early. Still, I wasn't disheartened. I pitched my tent in a grassy patch between granite boulders, lay back, and spent my first night under the stars without a soul in sight and only the sound of the creek cascading below.

Heading back to the car the next morning, I felt accomplished—but also hooked. I knew this was just the beginning, and that I would explore further.

The next trip beckoned the following weekend with weather too good to pass up. With my backpack loaded with all the necessities and an overnight's worth of food, I slammed the car door and hit the trail again. As before, the trail began following a creek enveloped in a canopy of towering pine trees before bursting into alpine granite under the piercing June sun. Sweat-drenched, I arrived at the lake—and immediately rigged the fly rod before setting up camp.

Ravenous little brook and rainbow trout,

Perched and hiding from the incredibly spooky fish in the clear water. Stealth was the name of the game for some of the river systems in the area.

Without hesitation, camp was always secondary. When you arrive to a pristine alpine lake without anyone around, you can't seem to cast fast enough - let alone set up the camera to get a shot like this.

no longer than a ruler, voraciously smacked dry flies the moment they landed on the water. Both dry and subsurface flies were equally productive, but the Elk Hair Caddis became my go-to fly for the summer. I skated it across the surface and counted the seconds until a strike.

The lake also teemed with small black gnats, and the fish were going crazy over them. I had success midday with the caddis, but the gnat and mosquito patterns took over by late afternoon. I missed fish not due to poor timing, but because of the distracting views. I would gaze at majestic granite instead of watching my fly.

It was early June, with snow still stacked up at the edge of the lakes, trickling meltwater down into them. Summer was upon me and more trails beckoned. I continued my exploration of the New York City subway–like trails of the Trinity Alps, this time heading to the area's metaphorical Wall Street. Arguably the most popular lakes in the region—the Canyon Creek Lakes—they are stunning, sitting beneath the backdrop of Mount Thompson, the second-highest peak in the wilderness. What an incredible distraction—trying to watch your dry fly while Thompson is lit up at sunrise or sunset. Still, I managed to hook a brown trout that smacked an Elk Hair Caddis as the wind slowly drifted it into view.

With July and August came warmer days and melting snow on the higher-elevation lakes. I was fixated on one of them that required an immense scramble over granite boulders. However, the scramble felt far from a chore, as a 500-foot waterfall cascaded from the lake's outlet. With every switchback and boulder I climbed, I was rewarded with a different view of the tumbling falls until I reached the lake.

And the lake? It had Sierra Nevada high-definition quality, complete with surround sound, but without the punishing altitude. From its shore up to the skyline, the view left me speechless. The vista of Mount Thompson is the best in the area. To have a lake nestled within such extreme granite formations is beauty overload. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. It felt like I'd been transported to the Sierra Nevada.

Once again, setting up camp could wait. I rigged up the fly rod faster than ever before. Caddis. Ants. Copper Johns. Woolly Buggers. Midges. Hoppers. Every pattern produced in the lake's deep, cold, and clear water. First cast or tenth—it didn't matter. It was the ultimate one-stop shop for alpine-style fishing. The lake delivered. Trophies were there for those who wanted them. Still, a trophy barely stretched a ruler's length.

But by then, reflecting on my summer adventures, I realized the trophy had nothing to do with the fishing.

With hundreds of miles of creek and rivers, and countless lakes - sometimes reflection and pontification are ok in order to fully comprehend the fishing ability of the wilderness.

As the days slowly started to shorten and the autumn air began to cool, most of the anglers shifted their focus to the rivers below, where the salmon and steelhead were beginning their returns. But autumn also meant that off-trail passages, now mostly free of snow, were accessible. I pondered the idea of exploring one of the many off-trail lakes in the region and found myself scrambling on hands and knees up a boulder chute that I hoped was the right direction.

The gamble paid off, and I found myself at a picturesque little lake, sitting in a beautiful cirque of stone ringed with trees. Tiny ripples of water fanned out from all around, bouncing off the shore from rising trout.

It was the perfect conclusion to a summer of exploration in this region of California. I was grateful for the experience and the solitude it offered. I cast out and hooked a few more brookies, but as always, missed more than I landed—too busy gazing at the natural beauty around me to notice the strikes on my fly.

That's the truth about these lakes—the ones I've visited and the ones I have yet to explore. It was never just about fishing. It was about stillness. Solitude. Setting up the tent after a long day's hike, boiling up a cup of tea, resting, and watching ripples on the lake under a cloudless sunset. That's what I went looking for.

The small rod tube strapped to the side of my pack barely registered against the weight of my tent, sleeping bag, pad, book, food, and water. These weren't burdens; they were enablers. Tools that allowed me to get out into these wild places and stay longer than just a simple day hike would allow.

That's the beauty of backpacking. And the Trinity Alps and their lakes were in my crosshairs all summer. The trails were splendid and in great shape. The weather—from late spring to early fall—was remarkably dry. The human presence? Small-town variety. Whether it's your first time in the backcountry or you're a seasoned veteran, this wilderness is a solitary playground for the backpacker and the curious angler alike.

I found what I was looking for: an alpine sanctuary, unchanged and timeless, where the trout outnumber the people—and the silence speaks for itself.

Gear for the Backcountry

Suggested Fly Gear

Nothing bigger than a 5-weight
3-weight is optimal with a floating line
Sinking line is a fun option and not too heavy
5X to 6X tippet, ultra small

Useful Fly Patterns

"Use a size 16" - Craig Ballenger
Elk Hair Caddis
Hoppers
Ants
Gnats
Beetles
Mosquitos
Adams
Woolly Buggers
Copper Johns
Midges

Necessary Accessories

Sunscreen
Sunglasses
Hat
Beanie
Down jacket
Rain jacket
Water filter
Headlamp
Air pad
Sleeping bag (32° minimum)
Trekking poles
Bug spray
Tent
Sea to Summit cook set
Camp stove
Water filtration system

Jetboil Fast Boil Zip with the French Press Adapter

Sawyer Squeeze Water Filtration System

A LIFE IN LINE

Al Kyte on 75 Years of Fly Fishing

Interview by Dan Madison and John Kreiter
Edited by Karen Valentine

For more than seven decades, Al Kyte has been a quiet revolutionary in the world of fly fishing. While many know him as a gifted educator and writer, Kyte's pioneering research into the biomechanics of fly casting helped shift the way we understand, teach, and perform one of angling's most fundamental skills. At a time when casting instruction relied largely on tradition and imitation, Kyte brought a teacher's insight and a scientist's precision to the task—analyzing movement, celebrating variation, and encouraging a more inclusive understanding of technique.

In this conversation, Kyte reflects on a remarkable journey that began in the Sierra streams of postwar California and led to classrooms, casting ponds, and conferences around the world. His memories are as rich as the waters he fished, filled with stories of mentors, old-timers, and innovations that transformed the sport. Through it all, Kyte's humility, curiosity, and gratitude shine through—reminding us that the best teachers never stop learning.

What follows are highlights from an interview Dan Madison and John Krieter of Diablo Valley Fly Fishers conducted with Al in 2022.

Al teaching casting to one of his many students. Photo courtesy of Al Kyte

How did you start fly fishing and how was it different then? Was there a person who helped you get started? I got my start just after World War II in the late 1940s when I was about 12 years old. There were far more fish in the streams then. It was not unusual to see small schools of fish darting around. That was partly because there had been so few people in the mountains fishing during the war.

I was fortunate to have an uncle who was a skilled fly fisherman. He was excellent at fishing freestone streams with a dry fly, and he gave me what would be the equivalent in today's market of about $5,000 worth of fly-fishing lessons. The anglers we saw were mostly fishing with bait or spinners. The few fly fishermen were typically fishing with an attracter dry fly. We almost never saw a person fishing with a wet fly. Some years passed before I even heard the term nymph fishing.

There was a whole different fishing ethic, more of a farm work ethic. If you were going to take a break to go fishing, you were expected to at least bring home a mess of fish to feed the family. I remember my uncle talking about "dudes," people who wore fancy fishing gear. To my knowledge there was no slogan of "catch and release" and we hadn't heard of barbless hooks. The first conservation slogan I remember was, "Don't kill your limit; limit your kill."

How did you get started teaching fly fishing classes? I started teaching fly fishing through a University of California summer extension program after being asked to offer a physical education class there in summertime. So, I created a recreation class in fly fishing and it turned out to be highly successful for years.

I taught five consecutive Wednesday nights for three hours each night—the first half of that time out on the baseball field casting, and the last half inside teaching other topics such as knot tying, aquatic entomology, reading the water, wading techniques, safety, and equipment. Then we met up on the upper Sacramento River for two or three days for our field trip. I taught those classes for probably 20 years.

Meanwhile, Andy Puyans, who had a fly-fishing shop in Walnut Creek was offering a class back on the Henry's Fork in Idaho. He was having a problem with that class in that some of his students were just not prepared for the sophisticated level of his spring creek techniques. We teamed up, agreeing that beginning anglers should take my class first and then move on to his class for a further challenge. So, for years we had this one/two punch with two very different experiences: a freestone creek experience followed up by a spring creek adventure.

It worked well and Mel Krieger got wind of it. Mel had been offering the only well-known fly-fishing school in California. He asked if I would like to help teach some of his classes. He would typically hire a few knowledgeable fly fishermen to help teach an indoor class or two during his two-day, weekend schools as well as help with the casting sessions.

Flies
TED FAY

Three Upper Sacramento River Guides—From left to right: Ted Fay, Joe Kimsey and Al Kyte. Photo taken outside the motel room Ted had converted into his fly shop. Photo courtesy of Al Kyte

Soon I became the head teacher for Mel's classes when he was unable to attend personally. I taught all over Northern California and got to know other knowledgeable fly fishermen Mel brought in to help teach.

During those years, Mel and I benefited greatly from one another's influence. Each of us had something the other person needed and valued. He kept picking my brains for teaching ideas because of my educational background, and I was picking his brains for casting ideas because he had been spending so much time with tournament casters.

How did you start writing about fly fishing? The first article I wrote that had to do with fly fishing was about aquatic entomology. My friend Howell Daly was head of the Entomology Department at Cal but also a member of the Golden Gate Casting Club in San Francisco. He and another faculty member, who was a caddis fly expert, Vince Resh, agreed to co-teach a class in aquatic entomology through the adult extension program.

About 20 of us fly fishermen signed up for that six-week class, which gave me a rather unique background in that important fly-fishing topic. I was soon able to key out insects under a microscope that I had found in and around aquatic habitats.

I believe my most important article was "In Search of Etiquette" in which I put together a questionnaire and got responses from 50 experienced California fly fishermen, which I wrote about. I still believe that was by far the best article written on angler etiquette. In fact, here, years later, it was recently reprinted in *California Fly Fisher*, because of the continued need for more courteous behavior when fishing.

The article that brought me the most recognition was the article published in *Fly Fisherman* magazine that reported the findings of my research on the biomechanics of distance casting. It was titled, "Going for Distance." Soon I was hearing from readers in Norway, France, and England and even gave permission for it to be translated into Japanese and re-released in a fly-fishing magazine in Japan.

How did you become involved at the national and international levels? I guess my writing started me in that direction. My fly-fishing instructional book, *Fly Fishing—Simple to Sophisticated* was pretty successful, selling more than 20,000 copies and continuing on through several editions.

Yet I think there were three other factors that intertwined to bring me more widespread attention than that. The first was my biomechanics of casting research, the second was being selected to the Federation of Fly Fisher's initial casting board of governors (to set up and run this country's casting instructor certification program), and the third was being selected as a freshwater advisor on the Orvis pro staff.

The biomechanics research occurred because of my comparing fly-casting biomechanics with other sports. I had coached and taught a lot of throwing and striking arm movements in basketball, baseball, tennis, and fly casting, and only the fly-casting movements had not already been analyzed from a biomechanics perspective.

Fly casting was an activity ripe for research of this kind. The analyses done prior to this were mostly engineering studies on the relationships of such things as flex of the fly rod, path of the rod tip, and formation of loops in the unrolling line. Virtually nothing had been done on analyzing differences in the person doing the casting—the part that teachers want to know most about. And most of the top-level fly casters were not professional teachers, so tended to be dogmatic and defensive about their own style of movement. I needed to get at what was really going on with the various casters to achieve the effective loops that the engineers were so interested in.

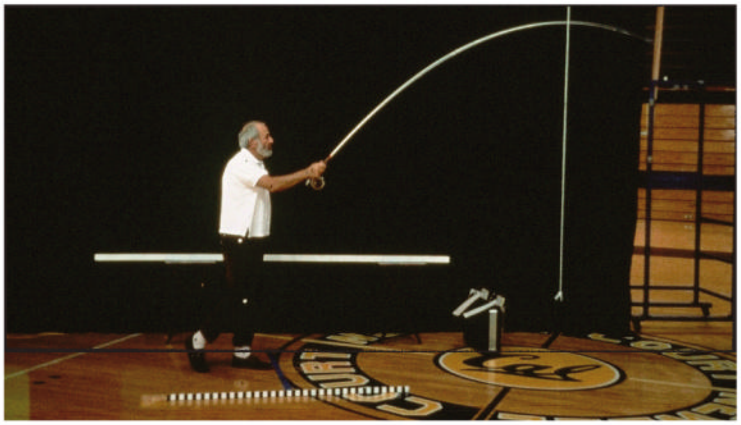
A visiting professor of biomechanics in our department at the University of California, Dr. Gary Moran, was very helpful in guiding the direction of my research study. He indicated that, first, I needed to decide whether I wanted to measure the accuracy or the distance of the casts. I thought about that and realized that the distance cast would require more movement by the caster, thus allowing us to get a more complete picture of differences in people's casting styles.

We decided that the testing of 20 casters, all effective distance casters by some standard, would allow us to analyze the differences in characteristics between the most successful distance casters and other successful fly fishers who were not able to cast quite as far.

We did a detailed study on distance casting inside the Harmon gymnasium at Cal, and later a second study in which we looked at different styles of casting as well as a few other variables. The results were published in *Fly Fisherman* magazine as well as in an international biomechanics journal. It was widely read and well received. There had not been anything like it done before and it has remained the landmark research piece of its type.

Dr. Moran presented our study at an international biomechanics conference and told me that a number of the scientists there were fascinated with it, although not necessarily interested in fishing. They couldn't think of another activity in which a person could maintain such prolonged control over the movement of a flexible lever. The closest thing they could think of was pole vaulting.

Are these studies where you became known for your ideas on "substance and style?" I believe the phrase "substance and style" has been used in many contexts, but I first heard it applied to fly casting by Mel Krieger.



Mel Krieger, an elite caster, participating in Al's Biomechanics study on distance casting. Photo courtesy of Al Kyte

When the fly-casting instructor certification program became a reality, one of the first things Mel did was to write a little booklet, *Observations on Teaching Fly Casting*. He asked a couple of us to help edit what he was writing, and one section was on "Substance and Style." I believe I had influenced his thinking on that because I had alerted him to the fact that there are "acceptable variations" in most athletic movements. He was already critical of those fly-casting teachers who insisted that students move the same way they do and wanted to invite instructors to be open to the idea of different styles of movement.

A few years after our first research was published, Dr. Tony Stellar, the head of a sports medicine clinic down in Southern California, asked if I would do some additional research on distance fly casting. This gave me a chance to look at differences between a person's short and long casts, between distance casting with fast and slow rods, and between distance casting with shooting-taper and weight-forward fly lines. Once again, I called on Dr. Moran for added input, and our results were first published in 2000 in American Angler under the title, "Fly Casting: Substance and Style."

In effect, that article got many people thinking about styles of casting for the first time. And many of the findings of that study became fresh ideas and approaches for teaching fly casting that were soon fully described in my fly-casting book.

This openness to different styles is probably what will be most remembered about my teaching. I am fortunate that about 95 per cent of my best casting and teaching ideas are published in the same reference, my casting book—*The Orvis Guide to Better Fly Casting*. This book has become required reading for anyone preparing to be tested for Master level instructor certification.

What has this been like for you, looking back across the 75 years you have been active in fly fishing? Today, I look across time at the overall effect of fishing on our trout waters, and certain factors stand out. With far more people fishing than before, spending many more days each year on the stream and armed with far more information on techniques for catching fish on a fly, the effect has been a consistent decrease in the numbers of wild fish in most public waters. When I was young, a person could pull over at almost any good-looking trout water on any stream in the Sierra and have a good chance of catching a few fish. The last time I saw a stream such as that was in a lightly traveled part of British Columbia.

What other changes have stuck with you? The biggest loss I feel personally, even bigger than the decrease in numbers of fish, has been the loss of the old timers—men like Ted Fay, Polly Rosborough, Jay Fair, Cal Bird, and Walt Vaughn. They were different than most of today's more sophisticated fly anglers. These guys were down-to-earth and generous—men spawned by the country at a time when it was possible to be less influenced by city lifestyles and values. They developed unique ways of fly fishing from years of on-the-water experience without the quick-learning advantage of a podcast. If he were still alive, my uncle would have said that "the dudes" have now taken over the sport. I just feel so fortunate to have known those men from that different time and been able to share stories and laughs with them. As I look back, those moments were precious.

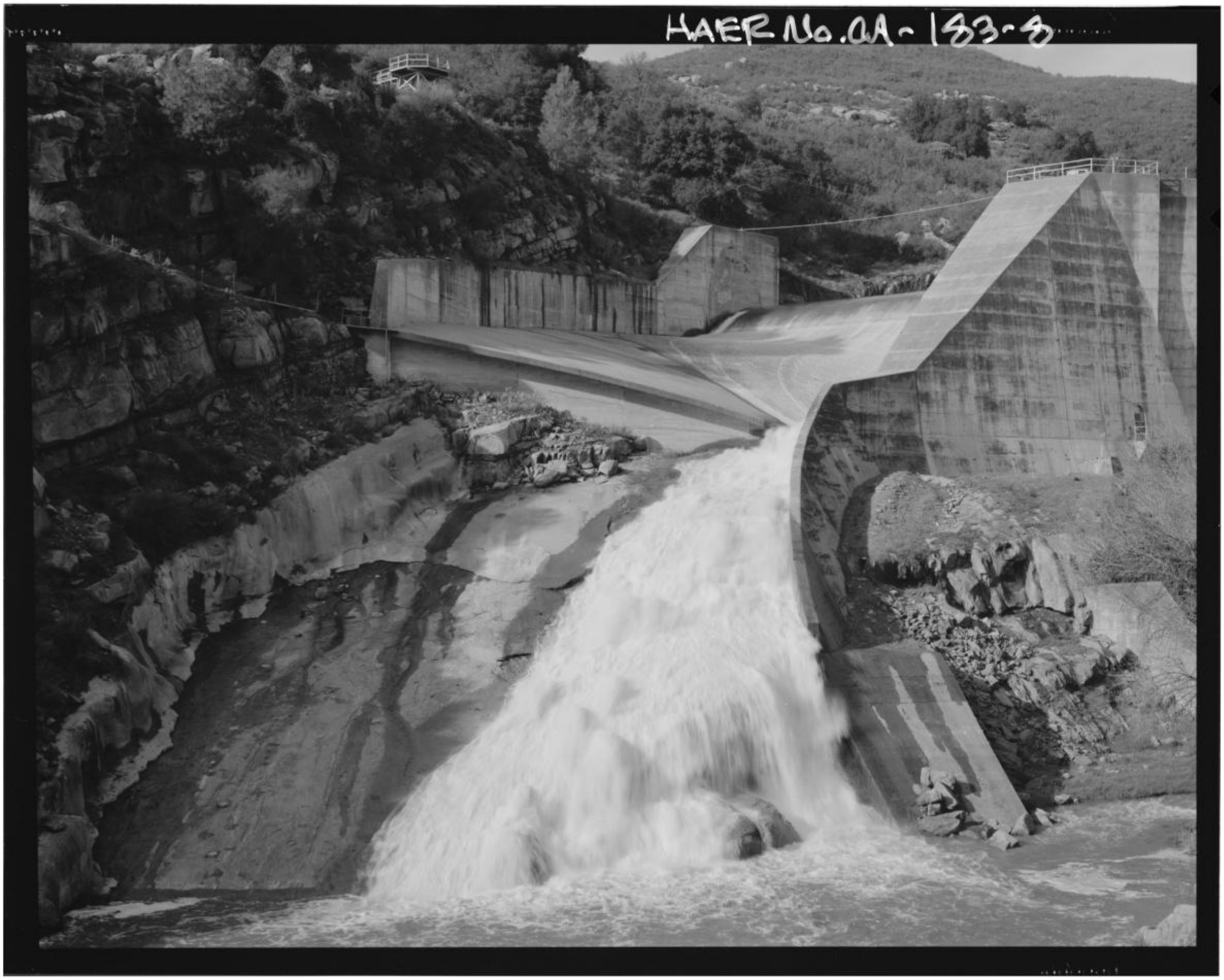
The equipment has continued to change as well throughout the history of fly fishing, and certainly over my 75 years. I have asked myself what new equipment innovation most changed fly fishing during my time. I thought about indicators, fly rod materials and types, large-arbor reels, wader technology, but believe that what changed fly fishing the most was the advent of sinking fly lines. As the technology of sinking lines exploded, we were able to fly fish faster, deeper runs of streams and rivers, reach down into deep lake water with a fly for any number of species of cold and warm-water fish, as well as add important options for a variety of saltwater species. I can't think of any other equipment change that has opened up so many new options for fly fishing.

Do you have any last thoughts or feelings about your time in the sport? Mostly, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I've had more really good fishing days than one person deserves. I've met and fished with so many wonderful people, only a small fraction of whom I've mentioned here. I've even been honored with a few awards.

The sport has given me the opportunity to experience different worlds—so many types of fly fishing and diverse environments and so many different perspectives—glimpses into business, medicine, research, engineering, and even movie making. Who would have guessed that a young boy who started by crawling on his belly to sneak up on brown trout in quiet water would eventually be able to experience so much wonder?

History of the Salinas River

By Dagur Guðmundsson



Rock face treated with gunite to prevent erosion. Camera facing southeast. - Salinas Dam, Salinas River near Pozo Road, Santa Margarita, San Luis Obispo County, CA Photos from Survey HAER CA-183

Driving through the Salinas Valley today, you'd be forgiven if you forgot about the river winding alongside the road. Sometimes called "the upside-down river," the Salinas is as funky a river as you will find. For most of its journey down from the hills of eastern San Luis Obispo County, it runs underground. Then, unlike most rivers in California, the Salinas runs south to north, flowing through the towns of Paso Robles, King City, and Salinas, before finally meeting the Pacific just south of Castroville. As the longest river in the Central Coast, it serves as a mirror to the Valley's turbulent wet and dry seasons, and its history is reflected in the art and literature of the Valley, and the memories of the wild fish that used to thrash in its banks.

Even when it has water from winter storms, it's hard to imagine that this shallow, muddy river once harbored a steelhead and Chinook salmon run. But before dams and heavy agricultural use depleted its banks,

A native pikeminnow from the upper Salinas River. Photo by Dagur Guðmunsson

the Salinas worked as a highway for salmon and steelhead migrating to tributaries over 200 miles upstream of the ocean. However, the Valley has always teetered between long periods of drought interspersed with periods of wet years. According to early 20th-century testimonials from residents collected by schoolteacher Harold Franklin, some years the fish simply never showed up, only to turn up in good numbers the next. The fish seem to be well adjusted to this drought roulette—one of the key characteristics of the Central Coast steelhead populations has always been their ability to adapt. Years when the coastal rivers don't breach the ocean, the fish will wait out their spawning runs until the next year, or go to the closest stream that's open. Then, during the wet years, the rivers get a run of fish like the dry years never happened at all.

The boom and bust of the river is beautifully exhibited in the work of John Steinbeck, perhaps the most famous inhabitant and writer of the area. Books like *East of Eden* and *Of Mice and Men* take place during the depression era, and the backdrop to these stories is the polarizing nature of the Salinas Valley. As Steinbeck writes in *East of Eden*, "I have spoken of the rich years when the rainfall was plentiful. But there were dry years too, and they put a terror on the valley...It never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way."

During the rich years, it was common to catch fish with spears or use barbed wire across the river to catch fish moving upstream and into the tributaries. It would take the steelhead around six to nine days to move from the mouth of the river up to the spawning creeks in the southern Salinas Valley, the area around Paso Robles. Given the wide, shallow shape of the river—even during peak flows—the fish would often throw V-shaped wakes across the surface of the water, giving away their location to locals who would spear them against the bottom. The San Antonio Mission, one of the largest missions in California, was built on the San Antonio River partly due to the abundance of salmon and steelhead that would migrate up that river. It's clear that the run of fish was good until the dams were built on the San Antonio, Nacimiento, and Salinas Rivers—the first two being major tributaries to the Salinas.

The building of the dams in the 1950s decimated the steelhead and salmon runs in the area. Built to provide a steady water supply for the agricultural use of the valley, the dams stopped any migration of fish to the spawning grounds above them. The Nacimiento Dam in particular spelled the end for any steelhead migration in the Salinas River past the Arroyo Seco, which joins the Salinas by Greenfield. As the biggest tributary to the Salinas River, the Nacimiento not only provided plentiful spawning habitat but also a significant amount of the water the steelhead needed to migrate upstream. By damming the river, the spikes in the flow of the Salinas River itself have been massively reduced in order to decrease flooding and improve the groundwater recharge. The Nacimiento Dam's outflow is mostly a steady 60 cubic feet per second throughout the year, with a few spikes during winter to provide enough flow to the mainstem Salinas for fish to access the Arroyo Seco.

Another major impact throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has been the loss of riparian vegetation in the river channel, resulting in increased erosion and silt buildup in the river. Riparian vegetation, meaning plants that grow on the banks of the river, is not only important for reducing erosion, but also provides shade for the river, habitat for fish moving through the river channel, and acts as a filter for pollution in the water. But since 1949, around 80% of the riparian vegetation in the upper Salinas River Valley has been lost.

The impact of this loss was seen recently during the wet winter of 2022-2023, when the Salinas flooded to over 25,000 cubic feet per second during a major storm. Prior to this event, the river below the Nacimiento Dam looked like a proper river, with pools and runs. A variety of fish species benefited from the healthy habitat ranging from native suckers, pikeminnow, and the occasional rainbow trout, to invasive species such as largemouth bass, white bass, and the ultimate trophy for

The Salinas is a shallow, low-gradient river for most of its length. Photo by Dagur Guðmundsson

A non-native striped bass from the estuary. Photo by Dagur Guðmundsson

any fly angler in California: the carp. After the river flooded, most of the pools, deeper undercuts, and all the gravel along the bottom were filled in with massive amounts of sand and silt. Much of this came from the Estrella River, a tributary of the Salinas that also drains a vast watershed east of Paso Robles, an area primarily used for cattle farming. The loss of riparian vegetation around the tributary has significantly increased its erosion rate.

Which brings us to the last hope of the Salinas Valley steelhead population: the Arroyo Seco River. Ominously translating to “dry stream,” and the only remaining tributary of the Salinas to still have a semblance of a steelhead run, the Arroyo Seco is a stunningly beautiful river. Flowing down out of the Santa Lucia Mountains, the Arroyo Seco has carved out a steep gorge with long, deep pools. It opens up to the Salinas Valley, where for about 10 miles it has beautiful steelhead runs, and you forget you’re on the Central Coast and not the Pacific Northwest. But if you follow the flow of the river downstream during the majority of the year, it seems to disappear into the ground, with the water being pulled for agricultural use and draining the river of the lifeline the steelhead needs to get upstream. It can go five to seven years without connecting with the Salinas River, but when it does, the steelhead miraculously find their way back to it.

It’s interesting—or at least it’s interesting to me, being from Iceland and having moved to the Salinas Valley—to see the parallels between the Salinas River and the glacial rivers of my homeland. The Salinas operates on that boom and bust cycle similar to the glacier rivers that flow heavily throughout the summer when the ice melts, but drop drastically in the winter, sometimes drying up completely. The fish mainly use these rivers as a highway to get up to the spawning tributaries, going long distances just to make it to a tributary that has spawning gravel. Most glacial rivers, like the Salinas River, are too silty and sandy for fish to spawn in. It’s a testament to the resiliency of trout, especially ocean-going trout, that they adapt to these similar systems in the same manner that are halfway around the world—one in a frigid arctic climate, the other in an arid semi-desert area.

How the steelhead seem to find their way back after all that time to their native river is a feat of nature I can’t explain, but what it does provide is a bright beacon of hope in a river system that’s been dammed, diverted, polluted, and abused throughout the years. Over a hundred years ago, the Salinas River used to flow into the ecologically rich Elkhorn Slough, where it shared an estuary with the Pajaro River just to the north. The steelhead have faced plenty of obstacles. The river regularly goes years without connecting with the ocean; its major spawning tributaries have been dammed, cutting off vital habitat and the natural flow of water; invasive striped bass have infiltrated the area, feasting on steelhead smolt; the river mouth was even diverted five miles south back in 1910! But despite all of this, the steelhead have persisted.

In a time when more and more of the native steelhead waters around the west coast have been degraded, dammed, or otherwise negatively impacted by human influence, I suppose there’s a bit of comfort found in seeing the steelhead of the Salinas River system make their way up despite all the challenges thrown their way. That this river, which looks more like a desert roadway for most of the year, somehow flows enough

Aerial view of the Salinas River. Photo by Benoît Prieur, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

to still work as a highway for fish making their way to the oasis of the Arroyo Seco to spawn is as remarkable a migration as any you'll hear about.

Looking through the long history of the Salinas River and the changes the river and its fisheries have undergone can provide some comfort in knowing that steelhead do still reach some of their spawning grounds. But it also represents the warning signs of what happens when we degrade their environment in such a way that they no longer return. The upper half of the Salinas Valley has all but forgotten about the steelhead and salmon runs that used to fill every creek in the area during wet seasons. Aside from the odd "Steelhead Road" or "Trout Creek," kids growing up in the area today have no idea what used to be. They grow up chasing bass and bluegill in the reservoirs and ponds behind the very dams that dammed the steelhead and salmon runs. They've never seen the native fish that supposedly made the 150-200-mile migration inland to spawn, so why would they care about restoring the fisheries?

To me, the Salinas Valley is a perfect microcosm of California steelhead issues: It is no mystery why the only remaining tributary to receive a run of steelhead is also the only undammed river in the valley. Give them a chance to reach their spawning grounds, and the fish will come even if it's only once every few years.

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THE FORAGING ANGLER

Kern County

By Lance Gray

Earlier this year at the Pleasanton Fly Fishing Show, quite a few folks came up to me with kind words about the "Foraging Angler" column. I thanked each one and told them how much I enjoy writing it. It's fun—and Kirsten and I genuinely have a great time hunting down new spots to eat.

One gentleman really stood out—though I apologize for not remembering exactly who it was. I had so many great conversations over those three days. He told me that when his copy of *California Fly Fisher* arrives, the first thing he does is flip straight to the "Foraging Angler" column to figure out where his next eatery would be and where he'd enjoy his next cheeseburger.

It means a lot to know the column resonates with so many of you. Thanks for reading—it's truly appreciated!

178 BAR & GRILL
LAKE ISABELLA

We stopped at the 178 Bar & Grill mostly because I was starving on the way to the Upper Kern. Kirsten and I were running late, and this spot popped up at just the right time. We're always on the lookout for new places to eat, and this turned out to be a good one.

At first glance, though, I wasn't impressed. It was lunchtime and only one other person was in the place—not usually a great sign. But the waitress was nice and friendly with a big smile. I asked what she recommended between the 178 Burger and The Pig sandwich. Without hesitation, she said, "Go with The Pig." So that's what I ordered. Kirsten went with the 178 Burger. I was stoked. If both were good, I was in for a feast. I got fries on the side; she went with a salad.

The food came out in about 10 minutes, and it was delicious. Everything that should have been hot was hot, and what was supposed to be cold was cold. The Pig sandwich was piled high with house-smoked pulled pork, thick-cut bacon, sautéed peppers and onions, and two slices of Jack cheese. It was rich, juicy, and full of flavor. Delicious. Kirsten took one look and said, "I should've ordered that." So, in a rare move for me, I traded half my sandwich for half of her burger.

No regrets—both were great. Her 178 Burger was excellent, perfectly cooked to medium-rare. The fries were hot and crispy, the salad was cold and crispy. What else can you ask for? The 178 Sauce was the kicker—don't skip it. Dip your fries in it. Trust me.

Bottom line: great food, great stop. If you're headed toward the Upper Kern, this place is well worth the detour.

178 Bar & Grill - $$
6107 Lake Isabella Blvd.
Lake Isabella, CA 93240
760-379-0178

Open Sunday - Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Thursday – Saturday, 11 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Owners Jeff & Helen Jost

PIZZA BARN
KERNVILLE

I have been stopping in at the Pizza Barn for a decade now. It was my final pit stop in that neck of the woods, when I was chasing the Kern River Rainbow for my Heritage Trout Challenge. I love this place. Great people, great food, and a true down-home feel. Owner Brad Alexander and his crew have built something special here—welcoming not just locals, but folks like me who roll into Kernville looking for a great place to eat after a long drive or a long day "creekin."

When it comes to pizza, I am a creature of habit. I like it meaty, and our usual go-to is the Meat Lovers, which Kirsten also likes. This pizza includes salami, Canadian bacon, pepperoni, ham, seasoned beef, and Italian sausage. We order it with the white sauce. It's fantastic.

But on my last visit, I decided to switch it up and tried the White Water Pizza—also with white sauce. It comes with pepperoni, diced ham, mushrooms, green and red peppers, and Italian sausage. I don't like green peppers (they give me the ol' heartburn), so I asked for extra mushrooms instead. No problem. That pizza is my new favorite pizza. The only addition I might make to send it over the moon is adding chunks of garlic. That would be fantastic!

While pizza's the main attraction, don't overlook their sandwiches. One day I grabbed a turkey sandwich to take fishing. It was as good as the sandwiches Kirsten makes for our guides' trips. It came on a soft sweet roll and was loaded with turkey—topped with Swiss, lettuce, and tomato, just how I like it. It comes with chips and makes for a perfect lunch on the water. Or, better yet, take the cold pizza with you!

Pizza Barn - $$
11401 Kernville Rd.
Kernville, CA 93238
760-376-1856

Open Sunday – Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.
Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Owner Bradley J. Alexander

SADDLE SORE SALOON GLENNVILLE

SADDLE SORE
SALOON

Kirsten and I found the Saddle Sore Saloon completely by accident. We were heading home from visiting our daughter Taylor in Lubbock, Texas. It had been a long haul, and we'd planned to do a little exploring east of Bakersfield on the way back. We turned off Highway 58 onto 14, then 178, then up Highway 155. We left Kernville without eating and kicked ourselves for not stopping at the Pizza Barn.

Kirsten was driving while I gazed out the window, eyeing every creek we passed. We finally hit that moment where you say, "Next place we see, we're stopping." Well, that turned out to be the Saddle Sore Saloon.

A nice young lady greeted us and showed us to a booth. I ordered a vodka and Sprite, Kirsten ordered iced tea. First sip of my drink and—whoa, baby, it was hot! Our server just laughed and said, "She's got a heavy hand." I didn't argue—just asked for a Sprite on the side to mellow it out.

I ordered the 155 Burger, and Kirsten ordered the Grilled Chicken Sandwich. Both came with fries. On the way in, I noticed a soup special—chicken vegetable—so I added a cup. What I got was a full bowl, packed with chunks of chicken, veggies, egg noodles, and a lightly salted broth. It hit the spot.

When our meals came out, I was already into my second "Splash" (my new name for that Vodka-Sprite combo). My 155 Burger was out of sight. It was huge—half-pound patty, three slices of applewood bacon, Swiss cheese, and fresh, cold veggies. I chowed down. The fries were hot and slightly salty. The secret homemade BBQ sauce was sweet with a little tang—perfect.

Kirsten's Chicken Sandwich was a full butterflied chicken breast hanging over the bun, topped with provolone and a pesto mayo sauce that brought it all together. It was good. I ate the second half of that sandwich somewhere around Merced.

It's a great place to stop and refuel—whether you're after a hearty meal or just a "Splash" of something strong.

Saddle Sore Saloon - $$
10669 Highway 155
Glennville, CA 93226
661-536-8114

Open Tuesday – Friday 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Saturday 8 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Sunday 8 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Owners Jeff & Helen Jost

VICEROY INDIAN CUISINE & BAR BAKERSFIELD

This isn't the usual place I go to eat—not because I don't love Indian food, but because Kirsten isn't big on curries. (Unless we're talking Stephen Curry—then she's all in.) So Indian restaurants tend to be a treat when I travel solo.

On this trip, I was in Bakersfield to do a presentation for the Kern Fly Fishers. Our friends Brian and Teresa Adams—fellow traveling anglers—recommended we try Viceroy, a family-owned Indian spot next to the Kern River and River Walk Park. Brian, Teresa, and their friend Larry Elam all joined me for a late lunch.

Viceroy offers a lunch buffet with traditional Indian dishes, fresh veggies, and a lineup of sauces. Every meal comes with naan, traditional Indian flatbread. We ordered garlic naan, which was rich and crispy with plenty of garlic.

On my first round through the buffet, I started with a generous scoop of Basmati rice topped with Chicken Tikka Masala. The Chicken Tikka Masala is my go-to benchmark dish—if a place does it right, you know you're in good hands. Viceroy's version was spot-on: rich, mildly spiced, thick with tomato and onion gravy, chunks of green pepper, and finished with freshly chopped cilantro.

On my second trip, I got another helping of rice and added house Chicken Curry on one side and Lamb Pistachio on the other. The curry had a rich tomato and yogurt-based sauce with a generous portion of chilis, ginger, and garlic. The Lamb Pistachio was out of sight. I love lamb. Tender lamb in a creamy, mildly spiced sauce.

Everyone had a great time, ate well, and had smiles on their faces. The food was good, and the service was excellent.

Viceroy Indian Cuisine & Bar - $$
10650 Stockdale Highway Ste 100
Bakersfield, CA 93311
661-564-9621

Open Sunday – Thursday, 11 a.m. – 9 p.m.
Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

24TH STREET CAFÉ BAKERSFIELD

This place is what I call a classic "greasy spoon"—and I mean that in the best way. The 24th Street Café is a family-owned spot that's been serving up breakfast since the late 1980s, when Mark Huggs first opened it. It is still family-run today.

COFFEE SHOP

Kirsten, unfortunately, has never had the chance to eat here, but I've stopped in multiple times while I've been in town. It's tucked between two one-way streets, and I'll admit, last time I visited I ended up going the wrong way down one of them. A little embarrassing, but totally worth it once I got my meal.

While I usually lean toward Chicken Fried Steak and Eggs for breakfast, but not at this joint. The 24th Street Café offers trout and eggs. That's right, you can order either fried or poached trout. I ordered it fried. It comes out hot and crispy, like something you'd cook on a camp stove by the river. It's a great twist on the standard breakfast. I usually pair it with two eggs, home potatoes, and an English muffin. I also get a side of their to-die-for country gravy. Perfect for dipping my potatoes.

Truly a must for the fly fisher.

24th Street Café - $$
1415 24th Street
Bakersfield, CA 93301
661-323-8801

Open Monday – Sunday 6 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

GUIDE THOUGHTS

The Summer Doldrums

By Capt. Hogan Brown

Summer striper fishing is about as good as it gets. Photo by Hogan Brown

As a guide, angler, and general human on planet Earth, I love spring in Northern California. By the time midday temperatures reach 70-80 degrees around Chico, the climate, wardrobe choice, and fishing have reached perfection, creating a respite from the frigid and wet days of winter and the scorching heat of summer.

The analogies and examples of spring creating new life and rebirth in the natural world are endless. As a guide and angler, I feel a great opening of opportunity as rivers begin to drop from their winter highs, lakes warm up and turn over, and the fish that call both home start to feed, spawn, and generally leap onto flies like no other time of the year.

This creates an overwhelming number of choices and options for fishing. With so many options, I need spring to last at least six months to fit in every place I want to guide, fish, and explore. I feel rushed and pushed to fish every free second, trying to find the perfect conditions and not miss those magical spring days that can happen. Bottom line, I have spring fishing FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and serious anxiety about "getting to" all the places I have dreamed about fishing all winter.

Before I know it, though, I am running my air conditioner nonstop as the scorching summer heat arrives. To be fair, I love summer and the heat it brings, but it alters my attitude and mojo as an angler. I feel less rushed to fish "all the places" and that I have far fewer choices. The heat can create a serious lack of motivation and almost lead to accepting the missed opportunities of spring fishing, leading to a kind of waiting for fall and cooler weather. Most anglers refer to this emotional, environmental, and mental shift as the summer doldrums.

While summer striper fishing is usually as good as it gets, and trout fishing in the mountains around Chico is phenomenal for most of the summer, I just don't feel the same motivation to get out on the water as I do in the spring. I notice this trend in my friends and fishing buddies as well. Group chats that were bustling daily from March through May dwindle on the message app as the daytime temperatures reach the high 90s or triple digits. Fewer people reach out to ask about fishing or how it's been, and most of the time when I go fishing, I'm on my own.

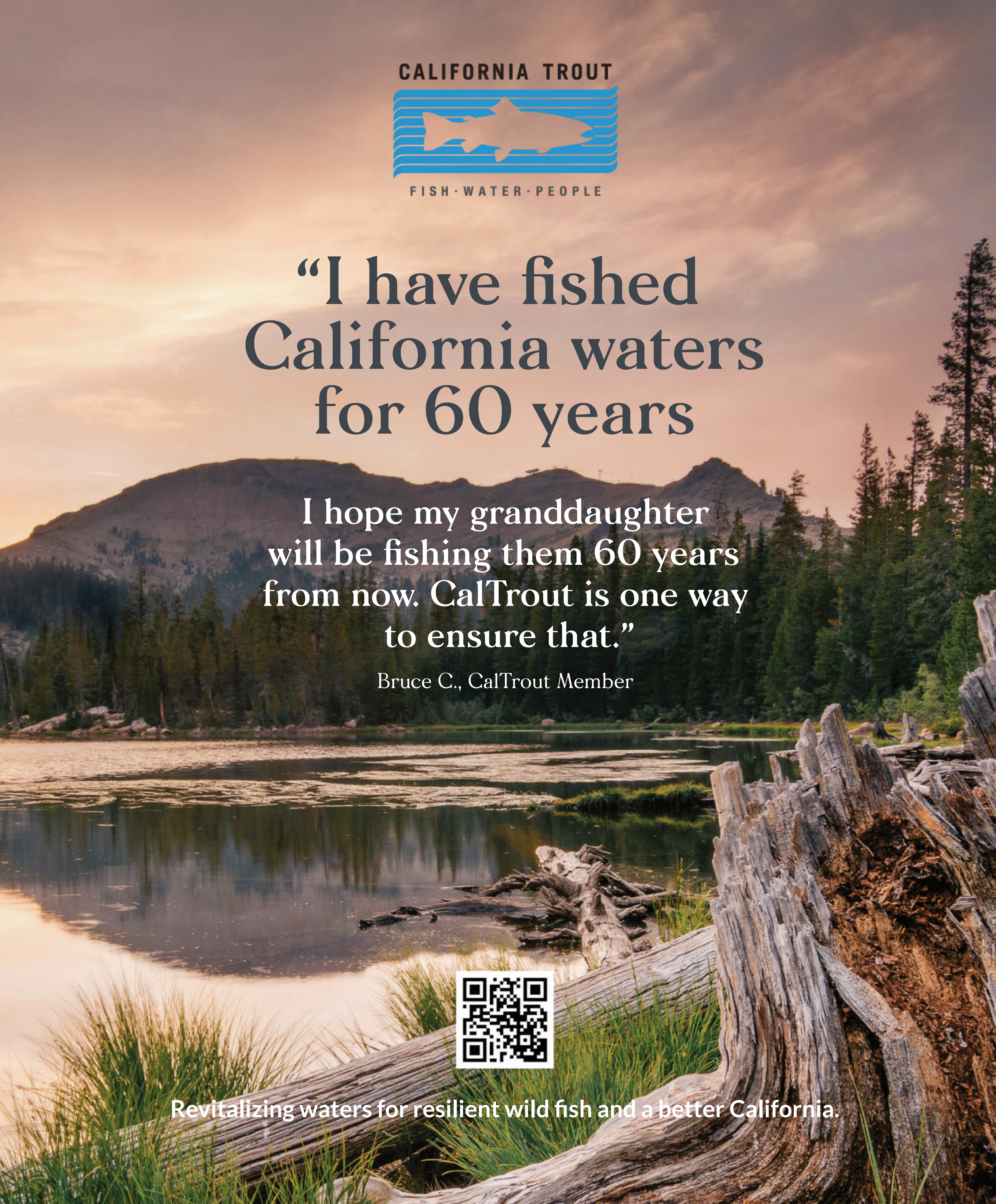
This spring, I made a list of fishing opportunities I wanted to pursue over the summer. Yes, I usually go striper fishing all summer, but that's because I live just two miles from the boat ramp, making convenience a major motivating factor. I am determined to carry that same drive from spring into summer to explore new fishing spots. Hopefully, having a list will help me push through the summer doldrums and break out of my routine.

Once the bass-filled lakes of the valley and foothills are filled with ski boats and Top 40 country music blasts from houseboats and wakeboard towers, I turn my attention to the high mountain lakes on the list that are "electric motor only" or simply too remote to attract the jacked-up trucks and wake-surf crowd. While the river is always a strong draw, I've been considering some excellent lower-elevation creeks and rivers that might offer great smallmouth bass fishing.

I have no desire to battle the crowds at the blue-ribbon trout fisheries or trek deep into backcountry streams, but some of these lower-elevation spots are close enough that I don't have to spend too much time on the road. They remain cool enough during the heat of the day for a refreshing dip and also provide plenty of eager smallmouth bass.

The summer doldrums are a real challenge for fly anglers in California. If you live in the valley or far from the coast, you might become an AC recluse. Meanwhile, those in mild coastal climates may enjoy high 70s temperatures until fall arrives before venturing further inland. In my experience, routine and convenience kill most fly anglers' sense of exploration.

I encourage everyone to brave the summer heat and challenge themselves to explore new fishing spots this season—carry that spring mojo into summer!



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